Riots and probation: governing the precariat

Wendy Fitzgibbon suggests that probation officers share some of the characteristics of those they supervise

The young people who took to the streets in August 2011 (see issue 87 of **cjm**) could be described as coming from what Guy Standing (2011) has characterised as the 'precariat'. Overwhelmingly from deprived communities, either in and out of insecure, low wage, unskilled employment or facing the prospect of such a status when leaving secondary education, many suffered additional marginalisation though previous criminalisation, special needs or education exclusions.

Standing defined 'precariat' status in terms of seven forms of insecurity: shortage of jobs (labour market insecurity); casualisation (employment insecurity); insecure employment contracts consisting of unclear job definitions and lack of upward mobility (job insecurity); lack of protection and regulation (work insecurity); deskilling (skill reproduction insecurity). This in turn leads to income insecurity. Finally, the attack on trade union rights and membership leads to representational insecurity (ibid). That the rioters faced many of these forms of insecurity is commonplace. What is much less so is that many of those working in criminal justice agencies tasked with supervision of sentenced rioters have themselves many similar characteristics.

The following commentary, based on a limited number of semi-structured interviews, examines how recent developments in the probation service have resulted in similarities between the rioters and those supervising them.

The aftermath of 1981

In the aftermath of the Brixton and Liverpool riots of 1981, many probation officers, echoing Lord Scarman, saw the rioters as 'political' in the sense of reacting to real injustices, at that time focused on police racism (Cooper, 1985). The probation officers interviewed in 2011 tended to view the rioters, particularly those involved in looting, as simple criminals out to get something for nothing.

> *People were motivated by greed and a group mentality took hold. The fact that people weren't being challenged as they were looting probably made it feel acceptable and this then led to other people getting involved.*
> (CS *Probation Officer*)

The exemplary sentencing of the rioters became a controversial issue. By September 2011 Crown Court sentences were running at around 18 per cent longer than for similar non-riot convictions and with a higher custody rate. Some probation officers supported this.

> *Yes, they [the sentences] needed to be strong to demonstrate that this type of behaviour won't be accepted in society. Harsh sentences were imposed to ensure these individuals were punished for their actions and to show the public that sentences are not too soft.*
> (CL *Probation Officer*)

However the majority of our respondents saw the sentences as both excessive and politically motivated. Nevertheless they did not see the riots as political or about protest. The 1981 riots and the Scarman Report inspired probation to innovate new methods of working with communities (Broad, 1991). Such inspiration was largely absent from the remarks of the practitioners working with the 2011 rioters. The main focus seemed to be on getting rioters to take individual responsibility for their actions.

> *I would be looking at their thinking and behaviour, their level of involvement, whether they were leaders or just milling around... I would want to look at their emotions at the time, were they part of a gang or other group, did someone ask them to get involved.*
> (AT - *Probation Officer*)

> *I would look at things like lifestyle and associates, thinking for yourself and resisting peer pressure, and explore victim awareness so people can think about the implications of what they have done.*
> (RT - *Probation Officer*)

These attitudes are indicative of the focus within a probation service which currently primarily concerned with risk and offenders taking responsibility rather than with notions of re-integration and rehabilitation.

Insecurity

Probation officers could now be characterised as sharing some of the characteristics of the 'precariat'. Their role and professionalism has been eroded; it changed with the introduction of new managerialist techniques emphasising efficient disposal of offenders and risk monitoring (Fitzgibbon, 2011). This has led to job insecurity for probation staff, a lack of opportunities for upward mobility, a failure to maintain high skills and status levels, a diminished sense of identity about the work undertaken and a lack of cohesion and unionisation. This is combined with the frustrations that come with lack of autonomy and professional discretion, a 'failed occupationality' and a profound lack of purpose (Standing, 2011). A quote from a social worker in Standing's book could just as easily refer to probation staff:

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My great frustration is that I have been told for a long while I'm good enough to progress to the next level, and I've taken on tasks beyond my job role, but there's no recognition of that. I just have to wait until a post becomes available. I think that happens to quite a few people from the team I started with, I'm the only social worker left. And a lot of them have left due to issues of career progression. We do a tough, responsible job and if that was recognised it might keep us in the job longer.

The precariously employed, deskilled operatives who work now within probation are tasked with supervising the rioters who share some of the same characteristics. The continual threat of job moves and shifts, the implied interchangeability of roles and tasks and the subsequent sense of fragmentation has led to a lack of cohesion both within supervision relationships and within the profession generally. Previously, probation's approach was more holistic and concerned with both welfare needs and reducing the risk of criminality. With the distancing of probation from this role, empathy and a humanistic approach to offenders has been substituted for a concentration on monitoring and risk assessment (Fitzgibbon, 2008). This relates to job insecurity and the insecurity experienced by workers in terms of their skills and career structure.

Governments quietly dismantled the institutions self-regulation of professions and crafts and in their place erected elaborate systems of state regulation... Occupations that set their own rules were seen as market distorting... more people were subjected to occupational licensing and obliged to conform to market practices. Regulations are splintering occupations, breeding para professions bound for the precariat
(Standing, 2011)

An example of this is the increasing use of minimally qualified probation service officers to replace trained and experienced probation staff.

Many probation staff psychologically and pragmatically accept these changes and resort to just getting the job done which indicates their distancing and detachment from their roles and clients. Large sections of probation workers are now un-unionised and have adopted a more punitive stance. There is a lack of social solidarity with other probation staff (ibid). They feel alienation from both their probation profession and others within it. Stability enables collective organisation, but insecurity in employment and flexibility in labour relations breed insecurity.

New constraints

These issues illustrate the profound differences in the contexts in which probation practitioners found themselves in 2011 when working with the rioters. Probation practitioners interviewed after the riots are working to completely different organisational constraints. They are also in precarious jobs which are interchangeable, expendable and ripe for privatisation. This makes them more malleable, workers who absorb the views pressed upon them by managers and the courts. Working practices reinforce the de-professionalisation and isolation of workers; functional flexibility and distance working/ remote working, 'hot desking'. All these factors lead to an increased instrumentality in the workplace which reduces the sense of attachment to the organisation and to others in the workforce. Hot desking - depersonalising office space also has a psychological effect and leads to a sense of detachment. This can be applied particularly to some of the probation practitioners where detachment also applies to their empathy towards and understanding of the rioters.

The principles of risk assessment by tick box are now common and reinforced by inspection regimes that focus on compliance with national targets and procedures (Fitzgibbon, 2008). As Standing again maintains, regulation through prescribed methods of working, targets, tick box forms, leads to interchangeable staff who can be swopped around. Displaced workers wonder why they invested in their career, education or qualifications when occupational structures are increasingly managed by commodified and distant managers who prefer para-professionals seemingly more malleable and flexible.

Within this environment there is little room for discussion about how to relate to riot offenders and their communities. This is reinforced by increased workloads and the deskilling of probation practitioners.

It's the type of probation officer, the breed of probation officer we had at the time... and the attitudes and behaviour of the people we've got working as offender managers now. And those people would have been much more politically sensitive and much more attuned to the social circumstances and social needs of their client group
(AW Probation Manager) ■

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