

Riots, pure and simple?

Tim Hope introduces this special edition
of *cjm*

'It is criminality, pure and simple'; so said the Prime Minister in his Statement to Parliament on 11 August 2011 following days and nights of rioting and looting across London and other English cities. As most of us usually concern ourselves with issues of criminal and social justice, we are more likely to agree with Oscar Wilde than David Cameron; that the truth, about rioting as much as crime and justice, is rarely pure and never simple.

Enquiring into the events last August serves many purposes: to reassert authority, to collate evidence, to apportion responsibility and blame, to demonstrate resolve, to press for desired reforms, to give assurances about shocking and extraordinary events. We make no claim to omniscient authority about the events of August 2011; nor do we rely upon the superficial methods of market research and opinion polling that nowadays pass for social enquiry and public consultation (see Morrell et al., 2011; *The Guardian*, 2011). Rather, we try to stimulate further debate, using the insights from our research.

Momentous events

The events of August 2011 should not be consigned to history prematurely. A national debate must continue because the momentous events last summer will have far-reaching consequences for many years to come. In the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury, during a year of severe economic crisis '...bonds have been broken, trust abused and lost'. The aftermath of the riots of August 2011 should not become the excuse for a negligent, callous and repressive solution to the deep fissures of inequality and injustice that have been revealed.

Perspective helps; as **David Waddington** notes, riots in England

have often taken a similar form, with a flashpoint incident (in this case the shooting of Mark Duggan by police in Tottenham) igniting widespread public disorder that comes to express many discontents. **Tony Jefferson** reminds us that the major riots of the past 30 years, including those in August, have been an '...angry, ongoing story of police-black relations, racism, the criminalisation of black youth...poverty and deprivation, chronic youth unemployment'.

We have a historic right to public assembly, crowds gather for many reasons and it is not always clear beforehand which will result in disorder, or how widespread. **PAJ Waddington** notes that the police will always face difficult choices of strategy and tactics as to how to maintain control or restore order. Nevertheless, the 'style' of disorderly crowds and protests may also be undergoing a cultural change; as observed by **Basia Spalek**, **Arshad Isakjee** and **Thom Davies** in Birmingham city centre, becoming more *carnavalesque* - youthful, spontaneous, and overwhelming.

One of the most revealing comparisons that can be made is with the riots that occurred in Los Angeles and other US cities in 1992. Unlike previous riots, the civil unrest in LA called for the deployment of a much greater number of emergency personnel and exacted a much heavier toll; a wider range of different ethnic and social groups participated, affecting many more communities and places than previously; the destruction and losses appeared to be more systematic and targeted; and the rioting spread out beyond the areas that had experienced it before (Johnson and Farrell, 1992). These impressions are borne out by the government commissioned report on the August Riots (Morrell et al., 2011) and by

our own local reports on Ealing (**Kevin Stenson**), Birmingham (**Basia Spalek** et al.), and Salford (**Bob Jeffery** and **Will Jackson**).

Immediately, without any evidence, the Bush (Senior) Administration blamed 'opportunistic thugs in gangs' for organising the LA riots (Johnson and Farrell, 1992). Similarly for our government, the August riots have confirmed diagnoses and policies already on its agenda, '...action necessary to help mend our broken society' (Cameron, 2011). We have since seen cross-governmental plans brought forward for 'ending gang and youth violence', including a taskforce to tackle 'troubled families', the politics of which are discussed here in relation to the riots by **Harry Angel**. The 2011 *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* strategy report is also covered in our topical section by **Jon Shute** et al., who comment on the evidential paucity and policy contradictions in the government's approach.

Just as the LA riots were sparked by the exoneration of the police who had been accused of the beating of Rodney King, so the shooting of Mark Duggan exemplified '...repeated acts of what is widely perceived...to be a blatant abuse of power by the police and the criminal justice system in general' (Johnson and Farrell, 1992). **Suzella Palmer** here traces the sorry story of the policing of Black communities in Britain, in an analysis suggesting that the lessons of *The Scarman Report* into the 1981 riots have never been learned.

A cruel twist

In recent years, the policing of 'violent street crime' has produced a cruel twist: a persistent canteen culture of institutionalised machismo and bigotry (helpfully articulated nowadays through internet blogs) and political grandstanding about 'zero tolerance', 'respect', gun crime, knife crime, etc., backed up by specious performance targets, has led to routine confrontation, botched arrests and fatal shootings, and indiscriminate use of police powers, especially stop and search that do little to address the problems of violence in the inner city.

The fatal consequences of the ineptitude that is leading to the alienation and criminalisation of inner city youth and their families are eloquently brought out in the evidence submitted here by **Sam Waterton and Kanja Sesay**, on behalf of the youth members of *Stop Watch*, targeted for being in the wrong neighbourhood, and wearing the wrong clothes; disproportionately policed and, having been trawled-up in the dragnet following the riots, now disproportionately sentenced.

As in Los Angeles, '...a laissez-faire business climate...has drastically altered the structure of economic opportunity' (Johnson and Farrell, 1992). For **John Lea** and **Simon Hallsworth**, the riots of the past 30 years are way-stations on the road leading to the 'neo-liberal' reconstruction of the UK and the dismantling of the residuum of the Welfare State's commitment to the alleviation of poverty and the creation of economic opportunity, exacerbated by the cuts to public and social services in response to the recent financial crisis. At a time when government policy is relying increasingly on localism and self-help to make good the lack of social provision, economic trends are concentrating poor people in neighbourhoods of high transience, migration and ethnic heterogeneity; exactly the conditions that undermine social cohesion (Sampson, 2012).

New urban order

Social division also accompanies schemes to lure capital back into the inner city (Johnson and Farrell, 1992). **Bob Jeffery** and **Will Jackson** show how local regeneration schemes have led to the 'gentrification by capital' of some inner city districts, while **Basia Spalek** and colleagues point to the similar regeneration of city centres. Existing residents, particularly the poor, become unwanted non-consumers, whose presence threatens to the new urban order.

The remaining inner city poor live cheek-by-jowl with the new urban elites, fuelling their youngsters' resentment of flaunted wealth increasingly beyond their reach;

unable also to gain access to the out-of-town shopping centres and privatised malls of our defining retail economy. Looting occurred in the big city centres and suburban retail locales that still allow the footfall of marginalised youth. Yet if these too become inaccessible, as in Los Angeles, it is the high streets of poor districts themselves that bear the brunt, including the minority-owned small businesses that still trade there.

Life chances of urban youth

The LA rioting was also the consequence of decades of social policy making adversely affecting the life chances of urban youth (Johnson and Farrell, 1992). In Britain, economic growth has been accompanied by a burgeoning inequality of economic opportunity that has affected young people particularly (Dorling, 2011). The poor performance of our education system in equipping many with the necessary employment skills, combined with the absence of entry-level jobs and a tightening of social benefits, has created a growing pool of under achieving young people 'not in education, employment or training', concentrated in poor districts, who are hit the hardest during economic recession.

Hugues Lagrange identifies similar conditions of social exclusion underlying the 2005 rioting in France. What is worrying for the future is that while youth unrest against marginalisation has grown in both countries, there is evidence of an increasing fracturing among young people, along class, racial and ethnic lines. The social life of many young people reflects their insecurity, as found in research by **Roxy Cavalcanti** and colleagues: connecting more with each other as they are disconnected from the economic mainstream. Yet in Britain politicians have played on anxiety, demonising young people as the harbingers of 'anti-social behaviour', '...children growing up not knowing the difference between right and wrong' (Cameron, 2011).

The events of August 2011 were a brief but spectacular demonstration of the collapse of the rule of law. Momentarily, the lid was lifted on the

simmering problems of social order in contemporary Britain, which the authorities seemed powerless to prevent from boiling-over. From the Prime Minister's *Statement* onwards, government has tried to shove the lid back onto the cauldron by depriving the rioters of ulterior motive, particularly aggression directed at the authorities. A primary concern seems to be to appease the virulent moral panic of the *Vox Twitterati* (*The Guardian*, 2011). Meanwhile, the criminal justice system has sought to replenish its symbols of control and deterrence, so clearly flouted during the riots, with tales about capturing culprits with CCTV footage, and retribution meted out in court, '... their faces are known and they will not escape the law' (Cameron, 2011). Much less attention has been given to the fire bombing of police stations in Nottingham (*ibid*), incendiary actions on any reckoning.

The scale of property destruction, injuries and fatalities exposed a void of insecurity in the community. While the Prime Minister commended the resolve of people who gathered '...to clean up the streets...who stood guard outside Southall Temple...who patrolled the roads of Enfield' (Cameron, 2011), it will be difficult in future to adjudicate between different communities' demands for protection, or to resist self-defence turning into vigilantism. As **James Treadwell** reminds us, as with the riots in our northern towns in 2001, it is the street-politicians of the far right that are most likely to capitalise on these fears. Yet, as candidates seek election to become Police and Crime Commissioners, which of them will be able to resist the insistent drumbeat of anxiety fuelled populism that usually accompanies the march of folly along the road leading to the penal repression of the dangerous classes (Curtis, 1988)?

As **Simon Harding** warns, if urban street gangs did not organise the riots, the riots clearly demonstrate their seductive power: an opportunity to take credit for command of the street, and for alienated and disaffected youth to accumulate the street capital that leads to distinction in the only arena

of prestige open to them. The power of the street gang did not diminish following the LA riots; on the contrary, gang violence accompanying the illegal economy flourished, preying on communities weakened by the neglect and capital disinvestment that followed, and initiating a vicious spiral of mass incarceration of young Black males, from which American cities may never recover.

Just as the August 2011 riots demonstrate the loss of hope during recession, so they also reveal the wounds that open-up when social regeneration is dominated by economic capital. The stark choice for our deteriorating inner city communities reflects an 'iron law' (Logan and Molotch, 1987); exclude your troubled and troublesome members, or be yourselves excluded.

This issue also features a review of the RSA *Transitions* report by **J M Moore and David Scott**, who examine the proposed social enterprise model and 'John Lewis'

style of prisons. **Malcolm Dean** traces the part played by the media in policy making, which has obvious resonance in terms of the focus of this edition of *cjm*. In other topical articles **Paul Taylor** et al., report on the failings in policing practices related to reporting and responding to disability hate crime and **Helen Baker** cautions against using popular assumptions to explain parental abuse. Finally, **Helen Mills** considers the role of a housing support charity in the resettlement of ex prisoners in a report from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. ■

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