Explaining the riots

P A J Waddington puts the August 2011 riots into the context of policing public order

The response of government, police and criminal justice agencies, media and campaigners across the political spectrum to the rioting last August was all too predictable. There was general agreement that these events were *sui generis* and portentous. No one seemed to recall that only a few months earlier students had rioted and rampaged during protests against increased tuition fees. The G20 was already a distant memory along with anti-capitalist rioting that stretched back to 'J18' in 1999. Whilst the tenth anniversary of the riots in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford brought them to memory, their relevance escaped many. The inter-ethnic disorders in Lozells, Birmingham in 2007 seems to have been airbrushed out of the collective memory. Protests against the *Satanic Verses* might as well never have happened. Riots in Backbird Leys in Oxford, Ely in Cardiff, and on Tyneside in the early 1990s have been engulfed in the mists of time; added to which 'larger louts' (who continue to lurk in the 'night-time economy'); soccer hooligans, picket-line violence and 'inner-city' riots.

Reminding commentators that 'we have been here before' is readily dismissed – as it has on each preceding occasion – with an insistence that whatever rioting is currently in the spotlight must be unprecedented. It is questionable whether it seems so different to the people left to pick up the pieces of homes destroyed, livelihoods jeopardised, and who mourn those who lost their lives (sadly, the three Birmingham men mown-down by a car are not the first to die in riotous conflicts).

Reason would dictate that recurrent events would display patterns, and they do, the problem is that those patterns are ignored. The most obvious pattern is that 'the commentariat' feed voraciously on the carcass of events for ideological reasons and/or vested interests. This is what theorists and researchers in social movements describe as 'framing'. Sometimes 'unholy alliances' emerge, such as the insistence from all sides that public spending cuts (which have yet to be implemented) were responsible for (a) the rioting and (b) the slow police response.

More plausible

The assertion that the rioting was somehow initially prompted by the shooting dead of Mark Duggan is more plausible. Certainly, family and friends of Mr Duggan and their supporters did stage a protest in the vicinity of Tottenham police station. There does seem to have been some confusion between the police and the Independent Police Complaints Commission over 'ownership' of the investigation. Doubtless this was experienced as unsatisfactory, if not evasive, arrogant and defensive by those demanding answers to their question about the circumstances of his death.

Yet, there is a much more general lesson to draw from those events, for they fit many others. There is an 'iron law of collective behaviour' and that is that it cannot be done alone. Indeed, a 'critical mass' is necessary to qualify as 'a crowd', for certainly if people gather in insufficient number they will not be heard and may easily be compelled to desist by a passing police officer or irate bystanders. Certainly, if there is to be disorder a threshold needs to be exceeded in the number of people present.

In order for a critical mass to be reached, people must assemble and the mode of assembly tends to differentiate types of gatherings (McPhail, 1991). People, who assembled to glimpse the Royal Wedding, or attend an open air concert, tend to form pretty quiescent (albeit large) gatherings. Whereas, those who assemble to protest, will tend to attract those who wish to express their anger and outrage (although only rarely is this violent).

However, assembly and the type of gathering that emerges from it is not a singular process. It has long been recognised that people assemble for one purpose, but either they become convinced that it should serve another, or it is 'hijacked' by sub-groups who exploit the 'critical mass' that is offered for purposes other than those for which the majority have assembled. Historically, disorder has frequently accompanied occasions such as fairs, hangings and holidays, when sufficient people had gathered together to supply the 'critical mass' needed for disorder.

Camouflage and support

Protest events are often an uneasy alliance between 'moderates' and 'militants'. 'Moderates' rely on 'militants' to draw attention to their cause, at the same time they fear the excesses of 'militants'; whilst 'militants' use the usually more numerous 'moderates' for camouflage and for support. 'Moderates' may disapprove of 'militant' excesses, but share their goals and perceptions.

Some people assemble expressly for the purpose of being disorderly (McPhail, 1994) – soccer hooligans reputedly fight-by-appointment using mobile phones. Social media have become technological aids to the assembling process, whether that is mobilising people in sufficient number to defeat hesitant authoritarian regimes in North Africa, or engage in riotous consumerism in London's summer streets.

It is often inferred that if people engage in disorder they must harbour grievances. Social movements theorists almost universally reject this

as an explanation (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). It may be that those involved in rioting or their advocates seek to excuse their behaviour by reference to grievances. Undoubtedly, some disorder arises from protests by those who imagine that they have some legitimate grievance – 'fire in the belly and iron in the soul' (Gamson, 1975). The problem is that whereas disorder is an occasional occurrence, grievances are longer lasting. If grievances explain anything, then it needs to be explained why disorder erupts only occasionally.

Far from anger, what surprised and puzzled many was the *carnivalesque* atmosphere exhibited by the August rioters. This too is a common feature of disorderly crowds. Horowitz (2001) comments on how deadly ethnic riots are frequently accompanied by joyful celebration amongst dismembered corpses. The inconvenient truth is that disorder and riot are fun (Rock, 1981).

Social constraints

Disorder and rioting represents a shedding of social constraints, which can be experienced as so liberating that it induces a state of what Turner called 'liminality' (Turner, 1974). This is also commercially promoted, for example in extreme sports such as 'bungee-jumping'. As some criminologists have noted, in the recent past behaviour that transgresses social norms has been promoted as a unique selling point of the 'night-time economy'. Such 'transgressive' behaviour has also been an increasingly prominent feature of protests, especially those designed to shock, for instance gay rights protests attended by men dressed as nuns (Gamson, 1989). In an environment where transgression is increasingly popular, it is hardly surprising that it surfaces amid riotous consumerism. After all, shoppers have behaved quite riotously during the 'sales' for many years and the opening of the IKEA store at Brent Cross in 2005 was

accompanied by scenes described at the time as 'riot' (as was 'Black Friday' in some American cities last November).

What can be done?

It took a few days for the riots to be quelled. Having erupted in North London, they spread London-wide the following day, and thence to other large cities. This prompted a chorus of denunciation of the 'failure' of the police to suppress the riots quickly by firm action. Earlier in the summer the Vancouver ice hockey team – the Canucks – were defeated in the final of the Stanley Cup. Disappointed supporters gathered in downtown Vancouver in sufficient number to exceed the threshold of 'critical mass'. They smashed shop windows, looted premises, overturned and ignited cars, fortunately no one was killed. The Vancouver Police were no more in evidence than the Metropolitan Police in August.

Amongst politicians and the 'commentariat' there was advocacy of 'tough' measures

The reason is simple: it takes time to mobilise officers, transport them to the scene of disorder (which may be continuously shifting) and deploy them on the streets. It would be foolhardy for officers who do arrive in insufficient numbers to engage in combat with a larger gathering. Chasing after rioters not only disperses a crowd, but also dissipates police resources. Like Vancouver this year and Paris in 2005, the police gradually secured the upper hand.

Amongst politicians and the 'commentariat' there was advocacy of 'tough' measures. Water cannons were readily available, we were assured. Water cannons are ill-suited for such fluid outbreaks of disorder, because they themselves need to be protected by officers on foot who cannot move swiftly. Baton rounds (or more accurately, Attenuated Energy Projectiles) have their uses, but those against whom they are used must be committing actions of sufficient gravity as to justify their use. It is, at least, arguable that young men trying to pull shutters

from shop-fronts, entering shops or leaving them in possession of looted goods justifies the infliction of disabling blows. One can only imagine the furore that might have followed the serious injury to an innocent bystander in such circumstances, such as that suffered by Ian Tomlinson in April 2009. And one person's 'firm action' is another's 'provocative over-reaction'! Ultimately, it was the spectre of rioters being arrested for offences much more serious than anything that was likely to be charged in the context of public disorder, which seemed to drench liminal excess in cold realism.

Will it happen again? Almost certainly! Will the police be better able to handle it or impeded by reductions in their number? Spontaneous public disorder has proven difficult to quell in the past and there is no evidence that it will be any easier in future. We should be careful what we wish for, since the 'cure' to this perennial, if infrequent, occurrence might be worse that the 'disease'. ■

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