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# From small protests to great riots grow: a critical commentary of the interconnection between race, class and economy in the 2011 August riots.

*Ian Fox-Williams is Deputy Head of the Law School, Birmingham City University and  
Ali Malik is based at the Law School, Birmingham City University.*

## Introduction

**The rampage of riots and looting in August 2011 may have conjured memories for many of the scenes of disorder during the previous Brixton and Tottenham riots in the 1980s. However, the manner in which the disturbances played out was beyond expectation to the point where rioting and looting swept through 22 boroughs of the capital and to other cities in England. This article will comment on three identifiable factors that have been regarded as significant influences in the uprising and wonton criminality last August; economy, race and the much maligned 'feral underclass' in context of the contrasting theories offered by commentators from Left and Right.**

## The economics of the riots

The austerity measures put into place by the coalition government along with a withdrawal of public services against the backdrop of a national and global economic downturn have all been cited as socio-demographic reasons for the riots in August 2011.<sup>1</sup> Such economic and social deprivation lends itself well to the Leftist argument. If we were to accept the Leftist interpretation as somehow legitimising the actions of those involved in the rioting and looting, it would arguably be flawed where the conduct of the rioters did not traditionally support a Leftist ideology of 'necessity'.

A good example here is the act of looting during the August riots, a Leftist explanation would offer a rationale that turns on a notion of equality yet even Leftist thinkers find it difficult to legitimise the fact that looters were choosing to target 'Poundland.' When looking at the reasons for the rioters to act as they did with regard to socio-economic factors, survival is clearly not the motivation, had it of been so then the rioting and looting would have been more geographically

spread. Instead rioting was limited to certain locations, arguably those involved where fighting against a relative deprivation against mainstream inequality between themselves and the rich.

The age of those involved in the disturbances is also important, according to statistics following the riots (BBC 2011) the average age of those involved was between 18-20 years-old. This is a demographic that has been given little opportunity to offer a constructive response to the socio-economic state of their country and their feelings of becoming disenfranchised and alienated.<sup>2</sup> This is only compounded with the closure of inner city youth services such as that in Haringey, consequently they have unified these individuals and their actions have empowered them to make a 'collective response'. This ability to act collectively gave individuals a new level of power, one that was beyond what they could achieve individually but one that was now a threat to the rich, the rich who owned businesses and who could now, through their lawlessness, be made to suffer. However the range of their target would become indiscriminate in that a small sole-trader who had their own business was held to be in the same esteem, and suffer the same punishment, as large chain stores.

Recent research by Ponticelli and Voth<sup>3</sup> indicate that austerity measures do coincide with an increase in demonstrations and rioting. There is no denying that governmental policies that reduce public spending will have, on average, a greater effect on the poor however to adopt the Right view, such does not, and should not lead to revolt. Instead moral decay amongst communities, poor parenting and an over dependency on state welfare has led to the popularly banded 'broken society' —sick communities that have bred those involved in the riots. To say that the Right completely ignore socio-economic factors is untrue to an extent; instead it chooses to couch its position in terms of betterment. The Right cannot ignore the

1. Birch, S. Allen, N. (2011) There will be burning and a-looting tonight: The social and political correlates of law-breaking. Available at: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/government/ethicsandintegrity/Birch%20Allen%20There%20will%20be%20burning%20and%20looting%2018%20Aug.pdf> (accessed 3 December 2011).
2. Ibid.
3. Ponticelli, J. & Voth, H.J. (2011) Austerity and Anarchy: Budget Cuts and Social Unrest in Europe, 1919-2009 *CEPR Discussion Paper No. 8513*.

financial woes that this country is currently observing however it cannot accept the view that such individuals had little choice but to manifest their dissatisfaction in such a way.<sup>4</sup> This would be going too far simply for the reason of where would such end, if indeed there ever was an endpoint.

Economy alone cannot be divorced from other sociological constraints; if it had been then the riots would not have happened in some and not all areas. It would also be foolhardy to pass off the plethora of representations in the media of looters with their widescreen televisions and trainers that these 'particular' riots were economically motivated, in fact looting occurs in all riots except that it is more visible on the streets.<sup>5</sup>

### Rioting: A colourless crime?

The issue of race and race relations is an important motivational factor behind the London riots. The initial protest started in Tottenham after a young black man Mark Duggan was shot by police officers. The anger and confusion that followed bore many similarities to the Broadwater Farm Estate riots of 1985 when a black woman Cynthia Jarrett suffered a stroke and died whilst police were conducting a search of her home. The rioting and looting that ensued and witnessed on television screens were scenes of young men, predominantly black, out on the streets once showing disdain against authority, and was were reminiscent of previous race riots.

Whilst some analysts wrote about their frustration at what they referred to as the *reluctance of the government to talk about London riots as a race issue*

*and not just an issue of criminality*<sup>6</sup> others described race, culture and race relations as defining factors. Right wing historian David Starkey, controversially, said that the summer riots in London were a 'black' issue and blamed the 'nihilistic gang culture' predominant in black communities. Conversely, Darcus Howe, a leftist author, speaking on the BBC said that he wasn't at all surprised by the riots in areas with a majority black population. Mr Howe even went as far as saying that '*I don't call it rioting, I call it an insurrection of the masses of the people*'. Mr. Howe was evidently pointing towards underlying factors that caused discontent among BME groups, particularly young black men.

Although Starkey's comments may be seen as too simplistic in nature and possibly stoking the flames of blame culture, the initial figures after the riots seemed to give credence to his views that the riots were led by BME groups. According to figures published by the Ministry of Justice, 58 per cent of those arrested and brought before court in relation to August riots were from BME groups. Rioters who identified themselves as black or from a mixed black background comprised 46 per cent and were overly represented in areas such as Haringey when compared to its resident population of the same age group.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst figures suggest that the majority of those involved in rioting and looting were from a black or mixed black background, the research carried out by LSE and The Guardian highlights that the role played by gangs is significantly overstated.<sup>8</sup> It is also important to consider that the areas in which most of the rioting took place were some of the most deprived boroughs

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4. Zizek, S. (2011) Basic Instincts: The rioters' impotent envy ABC Religion and Ethics. Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/09/01/3307345.htm> (accessed 17 December 2011).
5. Harvey, D. (2011) Feral Capitalism Hits the Streets. Available at: <http://davidharvey.org/2011/08/feral-capitalism-hits-the-streets> (accessed 23 December 2011).
6. Birbalsingh, K. (2011) These riots were about race. Why ignore the fact? In: The Telegraph. Available at <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/katharinebirbalsingh/100099830/these-riots-were-about-race-why-ignore-the-fact/> (accessed 2 January 2012); Adesioye, L. (2011) Tottenham Riots: It's Time for England to Confront Its Race-Related Issues. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/lola-adesioye/tottenham-riots-its-time-\\_b\\_920542.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/lola-adesioye/tottenham-riots-its-time-_b_920542.html) (accessed 21 December 2011); Young, T. (2011) The disturbances in Tottenham tonight are profoundly depressing. Available at: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyyoung/100099808/the-disturbances-in-tottenham-tonight-are-profoundly-depressing/> (accessed 23 December 2011).
7. Ministry of Justice (2011) Statistical bulletin on the public disorder of 6th to 9th August 2011, published 24 October 2011, pages 3 – 4.
8. LSE and The Guardian (2011), *Reading the Riots; Investigating England's summer of disorder*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/interactive/2011/dec/14/reading-the-riots-investigating-england-s-summer-of-disorder-full-report> (accessed 7 January 2012).

of London where black youths represent the relative population of the area.

Darcus Howe, as other leftist authors, alluded to underlying factors such as race relations and why there was so much resentment in young black groups against the police and authority in general. There have been calls to review the police powers of stop and search exercised in deprived areas as the racial profiling of BME groups by the police possibly leads to a perception of discrimination.

Both Scarman<sup>9</sup> and Macpherson<sup>10</sup> Reports were commissioned to specifically look at how the police engage with ethnic minority communities, however, the violence and anger amongst some youths during the August riots seemed to suggest that much work still needs to be done to improve race relations between Metropolitan police and members of BME groups.

### The 'feral' underclass

Leftist commentators interpreted the vast criminality of the August riots as an uprising or awakening against the ruling classes. However, most of the areas targeted during the riots in London were poor with high rates of unemployment, as one blogger commented 'that it is the lives of the poor in Tottenham and Haringey which were blighted by the riots, not the gated communities of Kensington and Chelsea'.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, right wing thinkers suggest that many of those involved in the riots belonged to '*the underclass*'. A group of people typically classified as having no job, no aspirations of future achievement, low educational attainment and a dependency on state welfare.<sup>12</sup>

According to Justice Secretary Ken Clarke, the rioters belonged to an underclass that is '*feral*' in nature and *cut off from the mainstream in everything but its materialism*.<sup>13</sup> By using the term *feral underclass*, right wing thinkers completely disregard the leftist view that the rioters were led by a social or moral motive and

instead substitute it with a motive of greed and criminality. Historically, the term feral underclass has been used to describe youth from poor communities that consists of both migrant and indigenous population who arm themselves with sticks and knives, who are nihilistic and amoral, resort to opportunist theft, muggings and looting to feed their materialistic desires and consumerism.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that most of the rioting took place in deprived London boroughs and a significant proportion of rioters were in receipt of state benefits, for example of those arrested 35 per cent of adults were claiming out of work benefits compared to a national average of

12 per cent. This coupled with the statistic that 75 per cent of those over 18 who were charged following the riots had a previous criminal conviction give compelling reasons to believe the right wing view that these rioters fit the description of those belonging to the feral underclass.

However use of the term feral to describe most of those involved in the riots is problematic. Former Acting Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Tim Godwin thought the term was unhelpful and that if the term was still being used to describe inner city youth then it was something for the City to reflect upon. Leftist

thinkers also believe that by labelling a group of people as feral underclass and ignoring underlying social issues leads to further marginalisation and consequent unemployment, both of which can lie at the heart of youth criminality.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

Without doubt the economic situation in England has made for sombre times, the latest cuts in spending has fed into a relative deprivation insofar as the poor will suffer greatest by these cuts whilst the rich are able to sustain. In this sense a deprivation theory could be

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9. Scarman, Lord J. (1981) *The Brixton Disorders, 10–12th April* (1981). London: HMSO.

10. Macpherson, W. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*. London: Home Office.

11. Bloodworth, J. (2011) Were the riots a working class uprising or inspired by rampant consumerism? Available at: <http://liberalconspiracy.org/2011/08/11/were-the-riots-a-working-class-uprising-or-inspired-by-rampant-consumerism/> (accessed 4 January 2012).

12. Whitehead, S. (2011) A perspective on the August riots. In: Stephen Whitehead Blog. Available at: <http://stephenwhitehead.blogspot.com/2011/08/perspective-of-august-riots.html> (accessed 27 December 2011).

13. Lewis, P., Taylor, M. Ball, J. (2011) Kenneth Clarke blames English riots on a 'broken penal system.' *The Guardian*, 5 September, 11.

14. Scambler, G. and Scambler, A. (2011) Underlying the Riots: The Invisible Politics of Class *Sociological Research Online*, 16 (4) 25 <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/4/25> (accessed 27th December 2011).

15. White, R. and Cunneen, C. (2011) Social Class, Youth Crime and Justice. In: Goldson B and Muncie J (eds) *Youth Crime and Justice*. London: SAGE.

used to compare the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the deprivation however is relative because only certain areas of the country were affected by the riots — cities perceived to lack opportunities for people and have been affected strongly by the withdrawal of social services.

If it were to be suggested that economy alone is not to blame, London, the original stadium for the August riots continues to foster a polarisation between the rich and the poor. Those responsible for the rioting and looting offered what they believed an appropriate manifestation of their feelings of alienation and resentment. The fact that in many of the affected London boroughs, the rich and poor were living cheek by jowl like Clapham did nothing more than further rub salt into the wounds perceived by the poor.<sup>16</sup>

It is also important to remember that the initial protest started after a young black man was shot by the police in Tottenham. Although race may not be an exclusive cause of the rioting and looting that ensued, there is a history of race related riots in Tottenham and other London Boroughs. Underlying grievances in inner city areas still exist especially among young black groups at their treatment by the police with specific reference to the use of stop and search powers. Recommendations made by Scarman and Macpherson need to be fully implemented and lessons need to be

learned in order to improve relations between minority ethnic groups and the police.

There is a strong case that the rioters originated from an underclass of people who not only find themselves disenfranchised from the rest of society but who have excelled in their own homogenous environment of crime and dependency. Use of the term feral has been regarded as extreme but so was the level and severity of criminal damage and violence, news images such as rioters pulling a motorcyclist from their bike in the middle of the road or someone helping a passer-by injured in the fray so as to distract him whilst others took from his backpack are acts nothing short of ferocious and brutal, indeed 'feral.' Though again labelling creates a perception of marginalisation, many of those interviewed who took part in the riots, were found to be highly articulate and politicised particularly when describing the problems they faced and their frustration due to perceived lack of opportunities.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst economy, race and class are all both separately and conjointly convincing in providing both Right and Leftist views for the August riots, the rational choice of those engaged to take part in such a sheer scale of lawlessness cannot be disregarded and could be suggested as the main driver for most of those who engaged in such wonton and shocking criminal behaviour.

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16. Callinicos, A. (2011) Condemn the Class System, Not Rioters. *Socialist Worker*. Available at: <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=25738> (accessed 21 December 2011).

17. Ball, J., Taylor, M. Newburn, T. (2011) Who were the rioters? *The Guardian*, 5 December, 11.