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Interview: Tim Newburn

Tim Newburn is Professor of Criminology and Social Policy at London School of Economics. He is interviewed by Jamie Bennett who is Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

Tim Newburn is Professor of Criminology and Social Policy and Head of the Social Policy Department, London School of Economics (LSE). He is the author or editor of over 30 books, has particular research interests in policing and security, youth justice and on policy-making and policy transfer and, with David Downes and Paul Rock, is writing an Official History of criminal justice.

He is currently the leading academic on the *Reading the Riots* project; a collaboration between the LSE and *The Guardian* newspaper, exploring the disorder around English cities and towns in August 2011. The first part of this research involved interviews with 270 people involved in the riots. A short report based upon analysis of these interviews and an e-book of collected journalism were published in December 2011¹. This interview focuses on this project and the findings that have so far emerged.

JB: Can you describe the background to the *Reading the Riots* research: how was it developed, how was it funded and how was it conducted?

TN: It is a study being conducted collaboratively between the LSE and *The Guardian* newspaper. It arose from a phone call I received from a *Guardian* journalist. He'd probably called several Universities. He'd been heavily involved in the reporting of the riots and the newspaper had collected a lot of data. He said that *The Guardian* saw themselves as being at the forefront of new data-driven, open access journalism and they were looking at ways in which they might exploit this. Building on the example of work that had been done in the aftermath of the Detroit riots in the late 1960s, they wanted to partner up with a University and get involved in a piece of social research. We agreed that this could be mutually beneficial. It was exciting opportunity to do something different, producing social research quickly but rigorously and doing it in a way that had the best chance of having some impact on public and political debate.

At the time this conversation took place in mid to late August 2011, there was a lot of political conversation in the aftermath of the riots, and people were making all sorts of claims about what had happened and why it had happened and what kinds of people were involved. The Government had set its face against a full scale public inquiry, so we thought there

was a gap. We couldn't fill it all, but we could at least try to gather some data in a reasonably robust and reliable way which would serve the purpose of having some impact on the public debate.

After that there was a rush to the wire. We approached funding bodies that we knew or had some relationship with or thought might have an interest in this. In the event we raised funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and from the Open Society Foundations. Simultaneously we put together a plan of action. The focus was to be on the rioters. We decided we would do in-depth qualitative interviews focussing on them, their lives and why they had got involved in the disturbances wherever that was. The view we took was that the difficulty would be finding people who would be willing to talk, who had been involved in the riots, who had engaged in activities that were criminal, who probably hadn't been caught, arrested, charged or prosecuted. It was going to be difficult to get those people to talk to us in an open and honest way. We figured that the only way to do that was to recruit people who had a link with the communities affected, so that they had some background that would make them plausible and be potentially able to negotiate access. We advertised through *The Guardian* and had just under 500 applicants. We shortlisted 50 and selected 30. They were recruited for up to four weeks work; they were trained and then sent off with a topic guide for the interviews and a guide to the kind of people we were looking for. They then went out onto the streets of various communities in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Salford and Liverpool.

JB: Why did you consider it particularly important to listen to the views and experiences of those involved in the riots rather than those from similar backgrounds who didn't get involved, or those that resisted the riots?

TN: We've had some criticism for this, but I think it is straightforward. In the aftermath of the riots, even though there wasn't a Scarman-type inquiry², there was a series of investigations set in train. The Deputy Prime Minister announced the appointment of a Victims and Communities Panel chaired by Darra Singh, which was to go around the country talking to people who were living in communities affected by the riots and those who

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1. Guardian/LSE (2011) *Reading the Riots*, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/interactive/2011/dec/14/reading-the-riots-investigating-england-s-summer-of-disorder-full-report>; Roberts, D. (ed) (2011) *Reading the Riots* London: Guardian Books.
 2. Scarman, Lord J. (1981) *The Brixton Disorders, 10–12th April 1981* London: HMSO.

suffered as a consequence of the riots³. To a certain extent that angle was covered, although that doesn't preclude others doing further work. HM Inspectorate of Constabulary as well as the Metropolitan Police had both set in train their own inquiries into the policing of the riots. We felt they were important issues to study, but set that aside for the second phase. It seemed to us that the big gap was rioters. Lots of claims were being made about who these people were, what they had been doing, why they had been doing it, but there was little empirical evidence. To us, that was a big and obvious gap and we attempted to fill it. That is not in any way suggesting that the perspective of others was less important, merely that this was the place we thought we could make a difference at this stage.

JB: Various causes and explanations have been offered for the riots. In your study, a number of these were considered and I would like to explore them. The riots were originally sparked by the death of Mark Duggan in Tottenham? How far did this signal event explain the origins and spreading of the riots? Was this a specific protest about this death or police conduct more generally?

TN: It is clearly the spark. That incident, and some combination of how the aftermath was handled, and the stories which circulated, realistic or otherwise, were the precursor to the initial rioting. What happened subsequently was a complex of events. On that first night a lot of what was happening was a reaction to that incident and its aftermath, but when one looks at subsequent days and certainly to other cities, the connection to that initial incident is pretty tenuous. People were still thinking about it and talking about it and it fuelled some of the anger and resentment, but by and large on subsequent days and in different places, people were talking about a more complex set of emotions covering anger, frustration, unhappiness with the police, a sense of social marginalisation, disadvantage, lack of opportunity, exclusion, and crucially, a degree of opportunistic greed. If anything distinguishes what happened from other events in previous years, it is looting. While looting has taken place in the past, it has not typically been in the

way, manner or scale seen in August. People saw an opportunity, in the phrase that was used, to 'get free stuff'.

JB: Let us explore some of those issues in more detail. Were there any other political dimensions in the motivations of those involved in the disorder? Was there any sense that they were resisting or revolting against social institutions?

TN: Not in a formal or organised way. I would be loathe to use the word 'political' myself. If one digs into the accounts, as we have started to do, what one finds is that certainly there is a sense of indignation, anger, resentment, a desire to rebel, but that was not at the forefront of people's minds in the way that one would think of a more standard political protest.

JB: Many have also argued that consumerism and the acquisition of goods fuelled the disorder. These explanations ranged from assertions that those involved were greedy or opportunistic, whilst others have offered more complex explanations, seeing the riots as a form of resistance to the exclusion from consumer society⁴. What did your interviewees have to say about these issues?

TN: We have heard all of those things in what they were saying. Certainly some of them did talk about conspicuous wealth and conspicuous consumption that they see all around them and that they, to some extent, are

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excluded from. That was in part an honest reflection of some of the feelings that they had, but the difficulty is that this is into the territory of 'techniques of neutralisation'⁵; that is potentially a post-hoc rationalisation of other forms of behaviour. What we did hear from many people was a straightforward and rather unapologetic expression of desire, want, need and greed. Here was an opportunity to take stuff, so people took it. That varied enormously, some of it was quite organised but more typically people found themselves out on the streets, became interested in what was going on and more or less stumbled upon an opportunity by seeing stuff lying around or seeing the shutters on shops pulled up, and for whatever reason not resisting.

JB: Are global explanations for the riots valid or were there local factors that shaped the

3. See <http://riotspanel.independent.gov.uk/>

4. Bauman, Z. (2011) *The London riots: On consumerism coming home to roost in Social Europe Journal* available at <http://www.social-europe.eu/2011/08/the-london-riots-on-consumerism-coming-home-to-roost/>

5. Sykes, G. and Matza, D. (1958) 'Techniques of neutralization: a theory of delinquency', *American Sociological Review*, 22, 6, 664-670.

initiation and conduct of disorder? Did the motives and methods of rioters vary from place to place?

TN: I don't think there is a one size fits all explanation. The sets of explanations and motivations that we heard, encompassed anger, frustration with the police, social marginalisation and dislocation, low level rebellion against social institutions, greed and so on, we saw those things everywhere. They were present in all of the locations in which we did interviews and in which riots occurred. What you do get is a different mixture of those issues in different places. The most obvious ever-present issue that people talked about was anger, frustration and resentment towards the police. That was ubiquitous. However, one hears it and that plays out in slightly different ways in different locations.

JB: I want to explore some specific groups and issues that have been discussed. The first is gangs. How far did gang behaviour influence what happened, for example in mobilising and facilitating involvement, shaping where and how disorder took place, and creating a social climate in which disorder was tolerated?

TN: I'm not sure I can answer the third part of the question about the creation of a particular social climate. We do have some reasonable ideas about other parts of the question. It was clear that there was a strong political view in the early aftermath of the riots that gangs were central to what went on and the organisation of it; that they were the key precipitating and organising groups behind the riots. We know now, and broadly it is politically accepted, that this was not the case. That said, it would be wrong to go to the other extreme and say that gangs were not involved in what went on as clearly they were in a number of ways. The number of those involved who had some link with gangs was substantially less than initially suggested or suspected, but was nonetheless still a not insignificant minority. There were also some examples where organised groups were involved in various events in parts of the riots, so they were there and did play an occasionally important role. The crucial issue is that with or without the presence of gangs, this occurred in the way it did largely for other reasons. They were not the central organising force and were not a central explanation for what went on. The other issue that we pointed to, which came out strongly particularly in London, was the truce that occurred. Groups that would otherwise have been antagonistic towards one another,

found a new common enemy during the riots. The hostilities ceased for the duration of the disturbances and groups that would normally have nothing to do with one another, became co-operative for that period of time.

JB: Was this about young men? What role did women have in what happened?

TN: I don't think it is about young men. The proportions are difficult to know, but we reckon about 15-20 per cent of those involved in the riots were women, so they were a substantial presence. They were involved in many, if not most, of the activities, so it's not reducible to issues of masculinity. More broadly women occupy an interesting role. One of the factors that played a role in restricting people's involvement, or even prevented their involvement, was what their mother would think about it, or would do.

This maternal involvement and control seems to have been significant for many people. Many who talked about what they did and didn't do and where they did or didn't go, talked about their mother, how it would be their mother who would pay the price. Not fathers interestingly. So, one of important facets of gendered roles here is the centrality of mothers as authority figures.

JB: Was this about race and ethnicity? Does this offer an explanation for why this happened, who was involved and what they did?

TN: The ethnic origin of those involved in the riots was broadly representative of the neighbourhoods in which they took place. Although on the surface, when one looks at ethnicity, it seems that there was a disproportionate number of young Black men involved, when one takes account of where the disturbances were taking place, that difference largely disappears. That is not to say race and ethnicity are not important, as they are still deeply inscribed in lots of the experiences being recounted. They were not necessarily unique to people from minority ethnic backgrounds, but they were experienced in particular ways. Nowhere was that more true than in relationships with the police. Although the anger and frustration was recounted by all, for those of African-Caribbean origin, this came with a particular history and one that was felt deeply.

JB: There was extensive discussion about the use of social media and instant messaging in facilitating the riots. In the cold light of day, what have you uncovered about this issue?

TN: *The Guardian* negotiated access to a huge database from Twitter, so there was a sizeable piece of

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research carried out by colleagues at Manchester on this, looking at what was being said, who was saying it, what messages were being retweeted, and what the content was. The general conclusion was that there was not a lot of activity that could be described as organising or inspiring rioting. This was more about talking, discussing and reporting what was going on. In relation to any organising, it was deployed more for the clear up than anything else. What that did reveal was the nature of the media. It is open, as with Facebook, so it would be naive to organise criminal activity using that medium. In contrast Blackberry messaging (BBM) did seem to play a more significant role. The difference is that BBM is both private and encrypted so it was used more by those involved to organise activities. I am still wary about how that is interpreted. There is a question about to what extent it is just facilitating activity rather than organising it? However, the speed at which events unfolded were only able to occur because of new social media.

JB: Why did the riots stop when they did? Was it because of increased police presence, the start of the rain or those involved had achieved their aims?

TN: I don't think it was the latter, partly because it was not that coherent. I don't think people had aims. The nature of rioting is that it is inchoate, people have a mixture of motivations, many of which they are not clear about themselves. So, there was not a sense that they had achieved what they set out to do. There was a complex of events. In terms of bring the riots to an end, policing was important. From the accounts of rioters themselves, it appears that events unfolded as they did because there was a sense of absence of the police. Here was an opportunity to get away with things because the police weren't there, or weren't there in sufficient numbers or were there but didn't appear to be doing anything about it. When the numbers increased that did have a profound impact on the willingness of some people to get involved or stay involved. Then there were the rumours about water cannon and plastic bullets. Though they may be ineffective in dealing with the fast moving events that took place in August, intriguingly a lot of people talked about the possibility that they might be used. I wouldn't want to overlay this, but I have a sense that the circulating rumours and stories about the potential use of baton rounds and so on, may have deterred a few.

Two other things were significant. It sounds funny but the weather is always important and the rain did have some impact. The other issue is that there was a sense in some places that the events ran out of steam —

it's only possible to keep going with these things for so long. Two, three, four days of riots and for a lot of people, the energy ran out.

JB: There has been a lot of discussion about the sentencing of those involved. Some have argued for exceptional sentencing but others have criticised this as disproportionate. What would be your view on these issues?

TN: We have not had the opportunity to analyse the sentencing in sufficient detail to make a sensible judgement about the proportionality or appropriateness of what went on, but said that, I would make a few comments. First, there were some headline cases which worried people, in particular that substantial custodial sentences were being imposed on people for offences which would not normally attract such sentences or in some cases even any custodial sentence. But these are headline cases and it is not clear to what extent they were typical. Second, I do have some concerns about what appeared on the surface to be a refusal of bail,

often for children. I would have some concerns about the extent to which that was a policy decision to do that. One final thing is that some people have rushed to judgement on the sentencing without recognising the complexity. In the early days, when the riots were ongoing, there was a sense amongst those in court that there was something out of the ordinary occurring and it was part of their role to make some

contribution to the restoration of order. It is important to recognise this, and to look at what happened at that time separately from what happened subsequently.

JB: What are the most important lessons that should be learned from the riots?

TN: There is a not insubstantial group of often young people who feel socially marginalised, cut off from the mainstream. They are not afforded the opportunities that others have at least the prospect of enjoying. That marginalisation leads them to feel that they have little to lose. Socially that is worrying. We have people who feel they have so little to lose that they are willing to get involved in setting fire to buildings in which people are living, attacking police officers, setting fire to vehicles, stealing goods, ransacking shops and communities. That is at the forefront of my mind.

The second issue is that it did reinforce in my mind that we have a problem with policing. Stop and search is problematic. Leaving aside the important issues of proportionality, intelligence-led approaches, or whether stops are conducted in a polite way, the reality is that significant proportions of the population perceive themselves to be unfairly targeted. This perception is at

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the heart of the matter. We are no closer to doing something about that and as long as we continue to fail to do so, one crucial aspect of police-community relations will not improve. The third issue is that I take from this that it is possible for academics and journalists to work together successfully to produce robust social research quickly.

JB: What does your work highlight about the potential for public criminology, in particular how co-ordination and co-operation between criminology and criminal justice policy can be developed?

TN: I have worked as a civil servant as well as an academic. I have been involved in what one might describe as policy relevant research, as well as having contact with policy makers over extended periods. I sit in the camp that sees policy making as a messy and complicated business. All too often there is a view that research evidence should necessarily play a central part in policy making but I see that as somewhat naive. What I would want to do is get social research out into the public domain in a way that at least allows the possibility that policy-makers might take it into account in decision-making. If it is there when these debates are taking place and these policies are being developed, then there is at least a chance that this will be one of a number of

elements that will have an influence. What this work does highlight is the potential for doing research quickly and getting it out in a way that is useable.

JB: How will your research project be developed during its course?

TN: We are in the second stage now. The intention is that having looked at rioters in the first stage, we now want to look at others involved in or affected by the riots. We have a series of 'community conversations' taking place, the first of which took place this week in Tottenham and there are six more planned in various locations. They are taking aspects of the research back to the communities affected, talking about the research and allowing a conversation to occur in which people can talk about both the work and their experiences of the riots, what they think are the political and policy priorities. In research terms, we have been interviewing defence lawyers, we hope to interview sentencers and prosecutors about the experience and the nature of sentencing. We also want to focus on policing and want to interview officers at all levels who were involved in the policing of the riots in all the major cities that were affected. Our aim is to try to understand the riots through their eyes and from their perspective. We hope to be in a position to report on this second phase in May or June 2012.



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