

Intakes: Communities, commodities and class in the August 2011 riots



INTRODUCTION

The following article was written in the immediate wake of the August 'riots' of 2011 in Britain and is an attempt to provide an empirical base to an analysis of the unrest. Commentators across the political spectrum have spewed out speculative explanations for the disturbances. What unites most of them is their lack of evidence and fixation on anecdotal or exceptional incidents within the 'disorders'.¹ Within the limited time available, we have attempted to gather as much quantitative and qualitative evidence as possible to underpin this examination. This evidence comes from various sources, including mainstream media statistics (events, arrestees, locales), relevant academic studies, social media, video and audio footage, some interviews with 'looters and rioters' and our own experiences as participants.

The first part of this article presents a brief 'history' of the August events. This is followed by an analytical comparison with the 'riots' of July 1981 that considers their spatial and temporal characteristics. The final part employs quantitative and qualitative evidence to examine aspects of the August events such as 'looting', the composition of the crowds and policing tactics.

¹ For example, most people know, via massive media coverage, about the injured Malaysian student who was mugged, the 'rioting ballerina', the Olympic 'ambassador' caught looting and the 'broom army'.

WHAT HAPPENED IN AUGUST?

Saturday 6th August

The execution of Mark Duggan in a mini-cab in Tottenham Hale by CO19 firearms officers using sub-machine guns on the evening of Thursday August 4th is generally regarded as the precipitating event for the subsequent 'riots'. However, unlike similar 'trigger' events in Brixton and Tottenham in 1985, where serious collective violence followed within a matter of hours or a day at most,² there was no such immediate response in this case. The family and friends of Mark Duggan (and much of Tottenham) awaited an explanation from the police,³ which never

² The shooting and crippling of an innocent (and unarmed) woman Cherry Groce in her bed by police in Brixton, south London on the morning of 28th September 1985 led to a demonstration outside Brixton Police Station later that evening. This rapidly developed into serious collective violence aimed at the police. A week later on October 5th 1985, the death of another mother, Cynthia Jarrett, in her home during an illegal police raid on the Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham, North London, precipitated the following day one of the most serious riots in London's history.

³ It appears that the succeeding 48 hours were a period of significant confusion for both the Metropolitan Police and the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC). Neither organisation appeared to want to approach the family of Mark Duggan 'with the bad news' or provide any details of 'what had happened'. Instead they appeared to be happy to spin stories in the media. This was certainly the case with the recent police killings of John Charles De Menezes and Ian Tomlinson. See *Mark Duggan death: IPCC 'may have*

arrived. Finally a demonstration, led by the family, marched to Tottenham Police Station on the Saturday afternoon, nearly two days after the shooting. After several hours of waiting in front of police lines protecting the police station, and with no attempt by them to parley with the crowd or offer any statement, a young woman who attempted to enter the station was assaulted by riot police. This 'trigger' incident at approximately 8.20pm led to the burning of two nearby abandoned police cars on Tottenham High Road and after no apparent reaction from the 'riot' police eventually a bus was set alight. However, this was not in the context of an exclusively 'Black' crowd as one eyewitness recalled:

I got back to Tottenham around twelve o'clock and the first thing I noticed is that there were loads of people on the street, you're not used to seeing that many people out in Tottenham at twelve o'clock. I didn't see any of the rioting yet. It was just people out and about. There was loads of Turkish boys, loads of Somalians, there was Africans, Jamaicans, White guys, Irish guys, Polish...it was like the whole of Tottenham was out...I see Grandmas, Grandads, little kids, it was like a party, like a carnival atmosphere, it was a bit strange⁴

After a bout of selective looting and burning,⁵ riot and mounted police charged the crowds and were resisted by burning barricades and missile-throwing crowds.

'Everyone was cheering, chanting, 'No Justice, No Peace', 'Rest in Peace Mark Duggan'. The people who were holding it off were there from the start, 'til three, four in the morning. So I respect that. Tottenham stood up, dropped whatever problems they had with other people and neighbourhoods and all that, and became as one. Since then you haven't had any

mised journalists' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-14510329>.

⁴ From the film 'Rebellion in Tottenham' (Reel News 2011; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Faysa6h0IR8>) 00:16:25. Other footage shows local Hassidic Jews passing out bread to the crowds and them subsequently being chased by the Police on the south side of the Police Station.

⁵ Initial symbolic targets for looting and arson included a duty solicitors, an unmanned police station, and later the Haringey magistrates courts and probation services. Also targeted for appropriation and/or arson were an Iceland and Aldi supermarket, a post office, Carpetright (see front cover) and a bookmakers. Several witnesses described negotiation within the crowd in the selection of targets, which explains the number of smaller 'local' shops that remained untouched despite being in the centre of the 'riot'. 'Rebellion in Tottenham' (Reel News).

violence between each other, any Black on Black crime or whatever'⁶

Having pushed the expanding crowds north along Tottenham High Road but failing to disperse them, the police were held up for some time at the Aldi supermarket as 'rioters' used shopping trolleys to halt the progress of the mounted police and came across a building site which provided plentiful ammunition.

The latter phase of the disturbance was to mark a characteristic of the unrest that was to follow. At about 1.30am, whilst large numbers of police were battling 'rioters' on the High Road, others targeted the Tottenham Hale Retail Park approximately a mile south, where hundreds of people were free to loot high-value goods from numerous major chain stores. The first signs of the spread of this activity outside of Tottenham appeared an hour later in Wood Green, nearly two miles to the west, where unopposed looting of the shopping centre continued for three hours until dawn.

Sunday 7th August

The general character of the August 'riots' were exposed even more clearly on the following evening with (unusually) little or no trouble in Tottenham but with the axis of looting switching to other areas of the capital. In the early evening in Enfield, four miles north of Tottenham (on the outskirts of the city), two hundred people (many masked) gathered at a prearranged location.⁷ One journalist who was present remarked:

'As in Tottenham the previous night, the makeup of the crowd reflected the local demographic. Young men were in the majority, although there were women, and some older people present too, but contrary to the reports I was hearing on the radio phone-ins, these were not "black youths": in Enfield, they were mostly white.'⁸

⁶ 'Rebellion in Tottenham' (Reel News) 00:17:29.

⁷ The following BlackBerry (BB) message was intercepted on the Sunday afternoon 'Everyone in edmonton enfield woodgreen everywhere in north link up at enfield town station 4 o clock sharp!!!! Start leaving ur yards n linking up with you niggas. Guck da feds, bring your ballys and your bags trollys, cars vans, hammers the lot!! Keep sending this around to bare man, make sure no snitch boys get dis!!! What ever ends your from put your ballys on link up and cause havoc, just rob everything. Police can't stop it. Dead the fires though!! Rebroadcast!!!!' The line 'dead the fires' was a call to halt the burning of properties, which had marked the 'riots' of the first night in Tottenham. Apart from a few exceptions this call was adhered to on the second night of the violence.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/08/london-riots-facebook-twitter-blackberry>

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/08/london-riots-mood-calmer-premeditated>

Despite the swamping of the area with riot police due to advance intelligence, sporadic looting and attacks on the constabulary occurred. However, unlike Tottenham, the crowds avoided set-piece confrontations with the Territorial Support Groups (TSG) who were present. Instead, small groups played a mobile game of 'cat and mouse' with the police, looting juicy targets that were left undefended. As Enfield drew in more police reinforcements, the plan changed:

The police appeared to have accurate intelligence, and were waiting at the next pre-planned destination. Teenagers told me...to head to Ponder's End and then, from midnight, to be in Edmonton.⁹

Leaving the swarms of police behind, the crowds moved onto new pastures, looting undefended major stores enroute. The same journalist noted the selection of targets:

'Shops that were targeted appeared to be either those that contained something of value – mobile phones, video games – or those that merely had easily smashable glass fronts. There appeared to be a preference for the high street chains, but other local, family-run businesses were also broken into'¹⁰

As sporadic looting and attacks on the police occurred in other areas of north London (Islington, Waltham Cross, Chingford Mount, Walthamstow), a flash mob appeared in Oxford Circus in the West End and began to break windows and a crowd of 200 gathered in Brixton after a festival and led mass looting of chain stores.¹¹ Ominously there were the first signs of trouble in Hackney where:

The looting, smaller in scale than elsewhere, had taken place earlier that night. Now the streets were lined with scores of police officers who had young men and women pinned up against the

⁹ Ponders End is approximately a mile and a half to the east of Enfield and Edmonton two miles to the southeast. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/08/london-riots-mood-calmer-premeditated>

¹⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/08/london-riots-mood-calmer-premeditated>

¹¹ One journalist described the scene: 'Men, women and teenagers helped themselves to goods and cash from H&M, Vodafone, McDonalds and T-Mobile, while a major fire took hold in Footlocker. People were carrying armfuls of clothes and shoes and passing them to friends in cars, carrying them away balanced precariously on the back of scooters or on foot. Although the police had gathered in a nearby side street they did not intervene for more than an hour'. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/08/london-riots-day-two-roundup>

walls. There was systematic questioning of everyone in the area. "Don't argue," I heard one police officer say. "This is a routine stop and search."¹²



Monday 8th August

The third day exemplified the diversity of disturbance forms and saw them spread outside of London to other major cities.

Aggressive stop and search operations in Mare Street, Hackney, on the Monday afternoon, led to a confrontation between crowds of commuters and shoppers and riot police. Police cars that were left blocking traffic were smashed up and the disturbance developed into a general confrontation, interspersed with the looting of selected targets.¹³ To the north of the incidents on Mare St., near the Pembury Estate, other crowds gathered, built barricades on the side streets and engaged in intense violence, including hand to hand fighting to halt the advance of riot police into the estate. These running battles, involving hundreds of participants, continued into the early hours of Tuesday morning.

As the violence began in Hackney in the early evening, almost simultaneously confrontations broke out in the south London areas of Peckham, Lewisham, Catford and Clapham. Where the police were driven off or outmanoeuvred selective

¹² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/08/london-riots-mood-calmer-premeditated>

¹³ These included a JD Sports shop, Tesco Supermarket, Carhartt Designer outlet store and a Spar shop in a petrol station. A crowd from Bethnal Green a mile to the south also joined the disturbance.

looting ensued. One witness described the scenes in Clapham:

'Dozens of youths started the night's violence...at just after nine o'clock when they ransacked a Curry's electronic store in Northcote Road. They were joined by dozens of others, many with black hoods and scarves after a small number of riot police left the scene half an hour earlier when they came under light bombardment from projectiles. Onlookers and locals identified many of those present as "blues, yellows and reds", members of local gangs who they said had called a truce for the evening. Along Northcote Road the windows of other stores in including Starbucks were smashed. The gangs ran along the road and at one point a middle-aged man and his wife pointed in the direction of a jewellers further up the road and other potential targets. Less than 30 metres away dozens of revellers stood outside a local pub drinking beer and looking on. As it became apparent after 20 minutes of looting that the police were not coming back the looters were joined by many more.'¹⁴

One of the most unusual events of the night was the premeditated attack on the wealthy area of Ealing in west London. As darkness fell, around 200 youths who had mostly travelled from nearby areas,¹⁵ took advantage of the fact that most of the local riot police had deployed to other incidents in London, to run amok for several hours. Some targets were looted on the Uxbridge Rd. and Ealing Broadway, but what marked the event was the widespread destruction of commercial properties and cars, particularly in the 'ultra-respectable' area of Haven Green. Within this geographical area, this was far less selective and clearly not based purely on appropriation of commodities. One journalist described the scene in comparison to other incidents in London he had observed that night: 'There were parts of Ealing where every single shop had been attacked, and every car set on fire.'¹⁶

¹⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/08/london-riots-third-night-live#block-40>

¹⁵ This was reflected in the arrests. A police superintendent stated 'Although some were from Ealing, a majority of the perpetrators came from outside the area' <http://www.ealinggazette.co.uk/ealing-news/local-ealing-news/2011/08/15/ealing-riots-officers-kicking-down-doors-as-riot-suspects-are-arrested-64767-29238923/>

¹⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/12/uk-riots-paul-lewis-five-day-journey?INTCMP=SRCH>. The variety of targets is obvious in this collection of photos:

In order to quell the violence the police redeployed riot police and armoured vehicles 'to push the hordes back',¹⁷ these were still in action at 4.30am in the nearby area of Acton (see Figure 1). Similar precision strikes by 'rioters' occurred the same night in wealthy areas of west London such as Notting Hill, Sloane Square and Pimlico.¹⁸ The shock to the rich residents of these districts should not be underestimated; although warned by the police earlier in the evening that their areas were being targeted, many of them believed their home neighbourhoods would be immune to the violence purely because of their bourgeois social make-up.



Figure 1: 'Jankel' armoured vehicles were deployed by the Metropolitan Police in several areas of London during the August 'riots' to break up crowds.

As 'riots' and 'looting' spread across London,¹⁹ other cities began to see the first signs of trouble ahead. In Birmingham, hundreds of people gathered in the Bull Ring shopping centre in the city centre and looted several chain stores despite a significant police presence. In the Handsworth district of the city, an unmanned police station was burned down. In Toxteth, Liverpool and Chapeltown in Leeds there were tense standoffs between police and crowds and in Nottingham police stopped an attempt to break into the main

<https://picasaweb.google.com/106393364195414121585/20110808WestEalingAndEalingRiots>

¹⁷ <http://www.ealinggazette.co.uk/ealing-news/local-ealing-news/2011/08/15/ealing-riots-officers-kicking-down-doors-as-riot-suspects-are-arrested-64767-29238923/> and <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2023984/London-riots-2011-Where-police-Shopkeepers-mystified-theyre-left-defenceless.html>

Armoured vehicles were also deployed in Clapham and Hackney to break up crowds.

¹⁸ Famously, customers were robbed during an attack on one of the most expensive restaurants in London, The Ledbury in Notting Hill. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/8689355/London-riots-all-incidents-mapped-in-London-and-around-the-UK.html>

¹⁹ Other areas of the capital hit by looting on the Monday night included Woolwich, Camden, Colliers Wood, Wandsworth, Chingford Mount, Waltham Forest, Stratford, East Ham, Romford, Gillingham and Bromley.

shopping centre. Later a police station in the St. Ann's district was attacked with petrol bombs.²⁰ In Bristol, 150 masked youths played 'cat and mouse' with riot police for several hours in the Stokes Croft and St. Paul's areas close to their primary target Cabot Circus, the main shopping mall. Despite the presence of police guarding the mall, a jewellers was looted. However, no serious attempts were made to rob the numerous 'local' shops in the nearby neighbourhoods in which the police corralled the crowds.²¹

Tuesday 9th August

The following day, the Metropolitan Police marshalled 13,000 officers on to the streets of London.²² Armoured vehicles were deployed once again and officers were armed with guns firing plastic baton rounds to quell the expected 'looting and rioting'.²³ Across the capital and in other major cities, shops and malls were advised by police to close early. 'Vigilante' gangs appeared in several areas supposedly to protect local businesses.²⁴

However, the first signs of unrest came not in London but in Salford, Greater Manchester, in the late afternoon as crowds gathered around the main shopping precinct. Several shops were looted and a BBC vehicle and a council housing

office set on fire.²⁵ A tense standoff ensued which ended with running battles as riot police entered local estates. Meanwhile in Manchester city centre hundreds gathered in the vicinity of the Arndale Shopping Centre and engaged in hours of skirmishes and 'cat and mouse' manoeuvres with riot police who were present in significant numbers. Despite this presence, several chain stores were looted and Miss Selfridge was set on fire.²⁶

In the West Midlands, once again Birmingham city centre was targeted by crowds for looting but the greater police presence reduced the takings. In West Bromwich hundreds gathered on the High St., built barricades out of burning vehicles and looted selected businesses. Wolverhampton city centre saw similar scenes, with three hundred people looting clothes and electronic stores and engaging in hand to hand fighting with riot police units.

In Nottingham, five police stations were attacked with petrol bombs,²⁷ and disorder broke out in Liverpool for a second night with running battles with police and sporadic looting in Toxteth, Sefton Park and across the Mersey in Birkenhead. In one incident in Bootle a gang of 70 attempted to break into a post office using a JCB digger.²⁸ Violence also flared in Gloucester, Leicester and Bristol.

These events marked the end of the cycle of 'rioting' and 'looting' that had lasted four consecutive nights. The event that overshadowed the final phase of the unrest was the death of three residents in the Winson Green area of Birmingham, who were involved in a 'hit and run' incident whilst taking part in the defence of local shops from looting.

²⁰<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/08/london-riots-third-night-live>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14436499> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-14455584>

²¹ The only exceptions were a convenience store and a Tesco Express in Stokes Croft. The former was described by one participant as a 'good target' because 'no one likes it, its overpriced, they're sexist, they're all horrible, everyone's been banned...no one nicked anything, we just smashed it up'. The latter had been (famously) at the centre of protests earlier in the year and had been wrecked during a 'riot' in April. A participant casually stated 'We were like fuck it, let's go do Tescos, we might as well... people round Stokes Croft hate Tescos...we saw it as quite a good target...it was a sign that the protests weren't over'. Interview with participants involved in the Monday events in Bristol.

²² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/09/london-riots-police-armoured-vehicles>.

Cameron claimed that 16,000 officers had been deployed, up from 6,000 on the Monday night. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/09/london-riots-day-four-live-blog>. This it was argued was the 'biggest police presence in British history' and was approximately half of all the serving police officers available in the Met. However, many other police forces lent reinforcements to aid the effort. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/09/riots-salford-wolverhampton-west-bromwich> and <http://www.mpa.gov.uk/statistics/police-numbers/>

²³ Although the baton round guns were deployed they were not used in anger.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/09/london-riots-police-baton-rounds>

²⁴ Notably in Eltham, Enfield and Southall in London. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/09/london-uk-riots-day-four-live>

²⁵ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/top-stories/2011/08/09/manchester-riots-2-000-thugs-rampage-through-city-centre-115875-23332940/>

²⁶ Other targets in Manchester city centre included Foot Asylum, Diesel, Bang & Olufsen, Tesco Express, Pretty Green, a jewellers, 3 Mobile, Ugg, Sainsbury's, Life Clothes, Orange, Jessops, an amusement arcade and several cafés. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/aug/09/uk-riots-incident-listed-mapped#data>

²⁷ These were the Canning Circus, Meadows, Bulwell, Oxclose and St Ann's Police Stations. <http://www.metro.co.uk/news/871917-nottingham-riots-arrests-to-hit-100-after-police-station-is-firebombed>

²⁸ <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/liverpool-news/local-news/2011/08/10/liverpool-riots-hit-city-streets-for-a-second-night-as-35-arrests-made-100252-29209866/>

AUGUST 2011 AND JULY 1981: ANALYSIS

In this section some salient features of the August 2011 unrest will be isolated and comparisons made with the July 1981 'riots'. This approach is taken in order to assess the differences in scale, spread, intensity and longevity of the recent disorders. It also allows some evaluation of the differences between the two periods, particularly in relation to police tactics, the objectives of the participants and the prevailing structural conditions.

July 1981: Like a summer...

On Friday 3rd July 1981 in Toxteth,²⁹ Liverpool, the arrest of a Black man for a minor offence led to a street confrontation with police that developed into a major 'disorder'.³⁰ Coincidentally, the same evening in Southall, west London, skinheads who had travelled to the area to see some 'Oi' bands³¹ engaged in vandalism and attacks on Asian residents and their shops prior to the gig. This led to a violent confrontation between local Asian youth, the skinhead protagonists and their police protectors, which left sixty-one police officers injured and the venue in flames.³² The Toxteth incident erupted over the weekend into arguably one of the most serious urban disorders Britain had seen in the twentieth century. Over the four days of 'rioting' (3rd-6th July 1981), 355 policemen were injured, 244 arrests were made (90% of which were Whites), 150 buildings were burnt down and CS gas canisters were fired as projectile weapons to disperse crowds for the first time on mainland Britain.³³

²⁹ In this article the more commonly used 'Toxteth' is used to designate the area locally known by its postal district as 'Liverpool 8'.

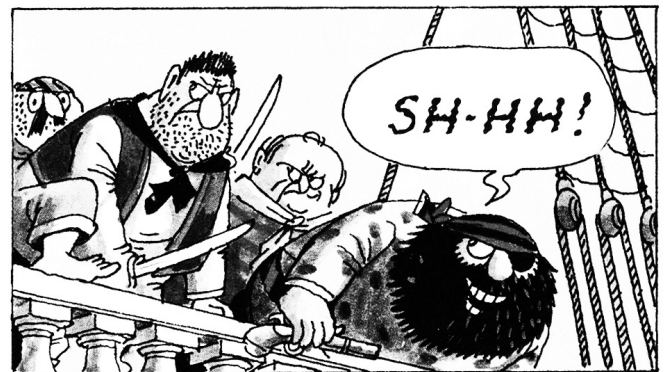
³⁰ Hernon, Ian. 2006. *Riot! Civil insurrection from Peterloo to the present day*. London: Pluto p.201.

³¹ 'Oi' was a sub-genre fusion of punk and skinhead music that came to prominence in 1980 and had some associations with far-right and racist groups.

³² Notes and Documents. The 'riots' 1981. *Race & Class* 23 (2-3) pp.225. Southall became a significant battleground in the late 1970s between the National Front a fascist and racist organisation, anti-fascist groups (including the Southall Youth Movement) and the police. The latter were regarded by much of the community in Southall as racist collaborators with the fascists particularly after the violence they unleashed on a large anti-racist demonstration on 23rd April 1979 leading to numerous arrests, injuries and the unsolved death of the schoolteacher Blair Peach probably at the hands of the Special Patrol Group. Ramdin, Ron. 1987. *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain*. Aldershot: Gower p.502, Fryer, Peter. 1984. *Staying Power: The History of Black people in Britain*. London: Pluto Press. p.397 and Ramamurthy, A. 2007. *Kala Tara: A history of the Asian Youth Movements in Britain*. Film. Lancashire: University of Central Lancashire.

³³ Twenty-five CS canisters were fired by Police as projectile weapons into crowds and several people were seriously

The following week (6th-13th July) was to see the unrest spread across England, beginning in Moss Side, Manchester with three days of violence which commenced on the 6th and included a massed attack by more than a thousand 'rioters' on the local police station the following night.³⁴ Over the following days and particularly over the weekend of 10th-13th July, cities such as London, Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, Leicester, Halifax and Leeds were struck by numerous disturbances in various locations. In addition, many towns experienced unrest including those in the Home Counties such as Luton, High Wycombe, Bedford and Maidstone. In all, over the months of July and August 1981 in twenty-five of forty or so police force areas in England and Wales, nearly four thousand people were arrested in relation to the disorders, with approximately two-thirds being described as 'White'.³⁵ Over 200 daily incidents of disturbances in 128 locales occurred in the month of July 1981 in England alone, with the vast majority occurring over a period of ten days at the start of the month.³⁶



Features of the August 2011 disturbances

Detailed examination of the August unrest allows a tentative designation of three forms of disturbance. These categorisations are fairly loose, as repertoires of activity such as collective violence directed against the police and organised looting were features of most of the disorders to greater or lesser degree. However, there were clearly some differences in the primacy of activity in the August

injured. They were not designed for this purpose and thus effectively became lethal weapons. Notes and Documents. The 'riots' 1981. *Race & Class* 23 (2-3) p.226 and Hernon, Ian. 2006. *Riot! Civil insurrection from Peterloo to the present day*. London: Pluto pp.201-6.

³⁴ Hytner, B. A. 1981. *Report of the Moss Side enquiry panel to the leader of the Greater Manchester Council*. Manchester: Greater Manchester Council pp.38-40.

³⁵ Home Office. 1982. *The outcome of arrests during the serious incidents of public disorder in July and August 1981*. London: Home Office, 13-10-82.

³⁶ 'Violent urban disturbance in England in 1981' R. Ball Unpublished PhD Thesis University of West of England 2011



unrest that were related to the motivations and temporal positioning of the events.

The first disturbance form, designated the 'community riot', is characterised by locale rather than purely by its activity. These incidents in August 2011 were typically located in largely proletarian inner-city areas of mixed ethnicity (e.g. Tottenham, Hackney, Brixton, Toxteth, Handsworth). Typically they were triggered by police actions (e.g. the shooting of Mark Duggan and the police reaction to the subsequent demonstration in Tottenham, the 'stop and search' operations in Hackney) in areas, which had a significant pre-history of both contested policing and 'riotous' responses.³⁷ These incidents were characterised by a large amount of violence directed against the police, static defence of 'territory' by the 'rioters' (such as Tottenham High Rd. and the Pembury estate in Hackney), attacks on important 'symbolic' targets (such as police stations, courts, public buildings) and the active and passive support of different sections of the local population (e.g. Tottenham and Hackney). Looting was clearly a subsidiary activity in these events.

The second category of disturbance can be labelled as 'commodity riot', as the primary aim of the participants was to appropriate goods. In August these events were the most common, were precipitated by the participants rather than the police and characterised by some level of pre-meditated target selection and organisation (using BB messaging, e.g. Enfield, Oxford Circus, Bristol and many other areas). They were usually aimed

at large concentrations of commercial outlets (such as shopping centres, malls and retail parks), involved significant crowd mobility (including the use of bikes and vehicles to transport 'booty') and avoided contact with opposing superior forces (of police). The 'cat and mouse' manoeuvring between the police and 'looters' that occurred in many incidents - the latter aided by mobile phones and instant messaging - was a by-product of the primary aim to acquire useful (and valuable) commodities for the protagonists. Looters operated in numerous but smaller groups than in 'community riots', often travelled significant distances to 'hit' selected targets and were not spatially tied to their home locales.

The final (and fairly unusual) type of disturbance, which occurred in August in a few locations in London (Ealing, Pimlico, Sloane Square, Notting Hill), was the 'anti-rich riot'. These were characterised by pre-planning, movements by participants out of home locales to attack areas that were *perceived* to be dominated by the wealthy and were marked by *widespread destruction* of cars, cafés, restaurants, boutiques and commercial properties that were not necessarily high value 'looting' targets. Face to face robbing, terrorising and violence, directed at rich residents of these areas were a significant feature of these events.³⁸

³⁷ Tottenham was the scene of one of the most violent anti-police 'riots' in London's history when the Broadwater Farm estate erupted into violence after the death of Cynthia Jarrett during an illegal police raid in September 1985. Mark Duggan lived on this estate. Similar events occurred in Toxteth, Handsworth and Brixton in 1981 and 1985 and Hackney in 1981.

³⁸ The death of Richard Mannington Bowes after being attacked in Ealing and the attacks on wealthy customers in restaurants were an example of this violence. Many wealthy residents interpreted the indiscriminate nature of the destruction in Ealing as proof of the irrational and savage nature of the participants. What did not necessarily occur to them was that *they, their personal property and their social spaces* were the targets for attack rather than purely commodities in chain stores, which were not to be destroyed but were instead appropriated. See for example the interviews with Ealing residents after the attack on Monday 8th August

1981 and 2011: Spatial comparisons

Having delineated these three disturbance forms, it is worth comparing the overall characteristics of the July 1981 and August 2011 waves of unrest. The first and obvious feature of both events was that many of the locales that experienced 'riots' were the same for both periods (e.g. Tottenham, Brixton, Hackney, Woolwich, Croydon, Walthamstow and Lewisham in London and Toxteth and Birkenhead (Liverpool), Wolverhampton, Salford, Handsworth (Birmingham), St. Paul's (Bristol) and many more).³⁹ Similarly, the countrywide spread of disturbances in August was comparable to July 1981 though less pronounced. Effectively a broad line can be drawn between London and Liverpool, which includes the west and east Midlands conurbations, Manchester and the Yorkshire and Lancashire towns and cities. Areas of the country that were relatively untouched in July 1981 (and in 2011) lay either side of this line and included Wales, Scotland, the far southwest, East Anglia and the northeast.

It was argued in 1981 by many in politics and the media that the absence of disturbances in these latter areas (many of which were areas of high unemployment at the time) was proof that *social deprivation was not a root cause of the unrest*. However, what was not understood in this argument was that 'riots' do not just occur in a spatially homogenous fashion; there are significant social processes that have to be underway for them to occur and to spread. In 1981 most of the diffusion of 'riot' within cities and conurbations was dependent on a major disturbance occurring somewhere in that environment and acting as a precipitator. In 1981 (and to an extent in 2011) these 'trigger riots' occurred in proletarian multi-ethnic inner-city areas and then spread across these cities into districts with proletarian mono-ethnicity (mainly White areas).⁴⁰ Many of the cities that 'failed to riot' in 1981 did not have significant multi-ethnic inner-city areas experiencing the enhanced effects of racist (and contested) policing; consequently they generally produced fewer precipitating events, less intense 'anti-police riots' and little or no spread to

outlying areas. This is not to suggest that either racist policing or concentrations of proletarian multi-ethnic populations was the underlying cause of the 'riots' (in 1981 or 2011); otherwise why did White proletarian areas explode in many major cities? Instead it merely indicates that significant precipitating disturbances (that would have kicked off the process) were not present in some cities. If they had been the story may have been even more dramatic in either era.

1981 and 2011: Temporal comparisons

Having considered the spatial characteristics of the disturbance waves, it is worth considering their temporal features.

Figure 2 is a plot of the number of disturbances against time (in days) from the initiating 'riot' for July 1981 and August 2011. It is clear that in July 1981 after the major precipitating events in Toxteth and Southall there was a significant lead-time (3 days) for the spread of disturbances to begin. In August 2011, however, the lead-time is non-existent; disturbances began to spread the day after the precipitating event in Tottenham.⁴¹ Typically the lead-time for 'riots' to spread within a conurbation is not purely dependent on the transfer of information from the mass (national) media, which is almost instantaneous (or at least within a few hours in 1981) and homogenous (that is it is broadcast across the country). Instead, once information about a disturbance has been obtained via this route, then it enters social networks that disseminate, discuss and evaluate the content of the news. Responses are then formulated which may lead to planning and mobilisation phases for action. All of this takes time and is dependent upon the speed at which actors can communicate. Research in the aftermath of July 1981 suggested that the main conduits for this process were the *'the classroom, the street and the pub'*,⁴² that is, *word of mouth*.

⁴¹ And in fact the first disturbance to occur after Tottenham was the same night in nearby Wood Green.

⁴² Quoted from Tumber who carried out the most extensive research into these mechanisms in 1981. Tumber discovered that most young people did not watch television news (the main and most immediate source of information on major disturbances in 1981). Instead he argued that the communication channels for 'riot' in 1981 were the 'youth grapevine' or the 'bush telegraph' Tumber, H. 1982. *Television and the riots: A report for the Broadcasting Research Unit of the British Film Institute*. London: British Film Institute p.46. Ashton referred to 'spontaneous intelligence networks' quoted from Cashmore E.E. 1984a. *No future: Youth and society*. Heinemann p.84. Another source stated 'the Police thought the youth grapevine was by far the most effective media for communicating a message, which burst out simultaneously in all parts of the country. It was throughout the entire week their only promising insight' Smith, Wolfie, Tucker, June and Speed. *Like a summer with a thousand Julys...and other seasons...* 1982 p.5. <http://libcom.org/library/summer-thousand-julys-other->

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/video/2011/aug/09/ealing-riots-residents-stunned-video?INTCMP=SRCH>

³⁹ 'Riot bingo' was a useful game during the research for this article. This compared disturbance locations derived from the July 1981 events with August 2011. The correlations between the two were striking and 'house' was a regular shout.

⁴⁰ For example in July 1981 in London, major disturbances in Southall and Wood Green eventually led to numerous other 'riots' across the capital. The serious Toxteth 'riot' led to thirty-five disorders across Liverpool in the succeeding days. This was also true of other cities such as Manchester (Moss Side), Birmingham (Handsworth) and Nottingham (Hyson Green) which all experienced similar patterns.

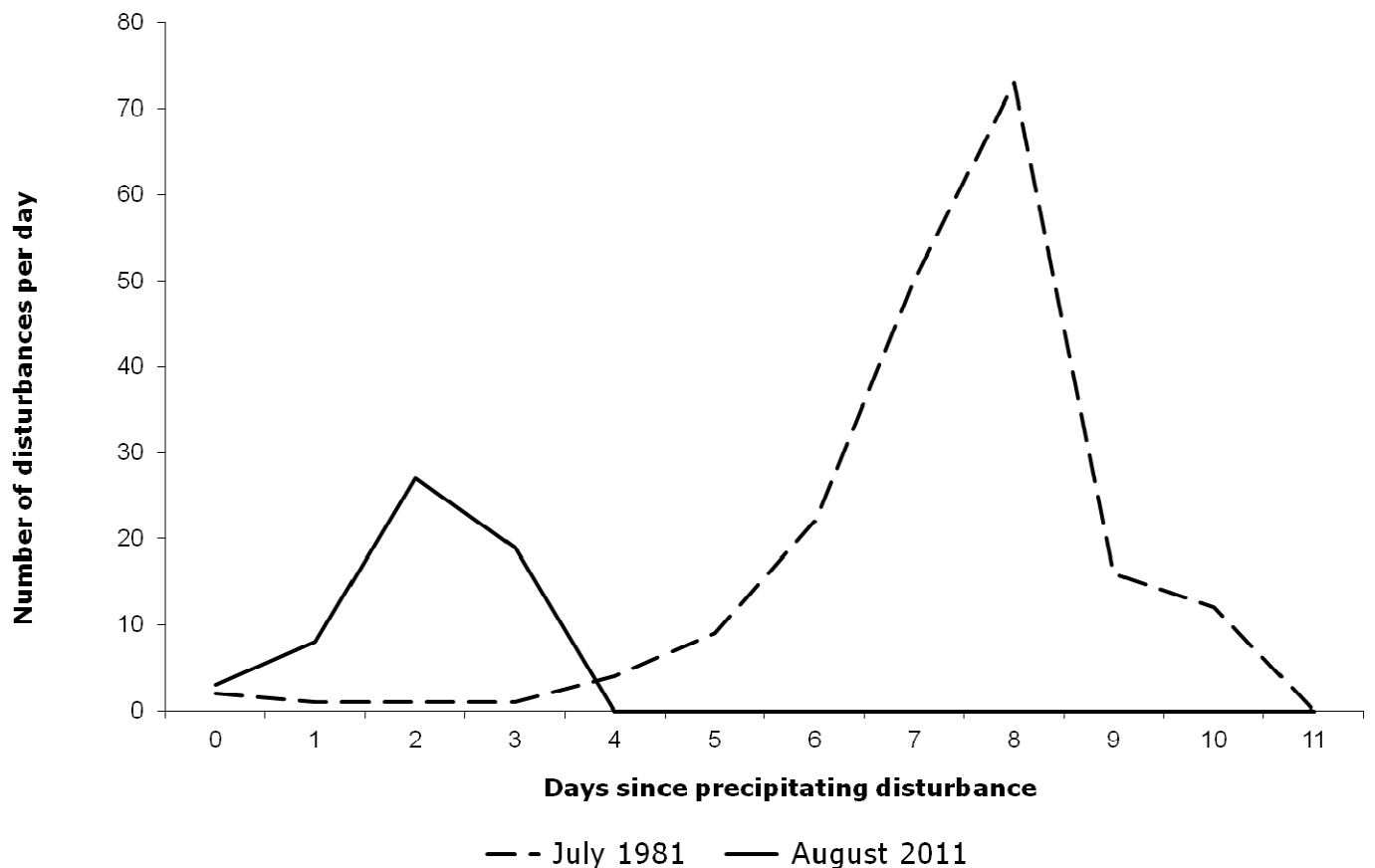


Figure 2: Comparison of temporal forms of disturbance wave for July 1981 and August 2011

Thus the lead-time in 1981 could be several days before a major disturbance generated further disturbances in the environs of a city. The impact of the internet, social media and personal communication devices (such as mobile phones and BB messaging devices) on the speed and ability to disseminate information (particularly for mobilisation) may be the major factor in the acceleration of response times to precipitating events in 2011. As a result, active social networks armed with such technologies not only move faster in their propagation of information and collective decision making prior to an event but also are able to act almost in ‘real time’, that is they can make strategic and tactical choices during a ‘riot’. This was not possible in 1981 and significantly aided the movements of mobile looting groups in 2011.⁴³ Added to the fact that the amount of

information available in social media in 2011 is vastly greater than in 1981, meant that most people knew almost immediately that something was happening on August 6th, *without having to watch TV broadcasts*.

Of course, access to such technologies, is a two edged sword as they are also available to the authorities. The monitoring of Twitter feeds, BB messages, e-mails etc. was a central part of the police intelligence gathering activity during the August events. However, it is clear that the disparity in command and control technologies in 1981 between the police and ‘riotous’ proletarians⁴⁴ has been significantly levelled in 2011. The championing by politicians and media gurus of the benefits of social media in protests in Iran and the ‘Arab Spring’ came back to haunt them last August. Ironically British magistrates courts responded to the use of social media for ‘propagating revolt’ as punitively as some Arab dictatorships.⁴⁵

seasons Finally Murdock stated ‘Youth in the inner city are not disorganised, they are simply organised in a different way, built around informal networks and unofficial leisure milieux’ Murdock, G. 1984. Reporting the riots: Images and impact. In *Scarman and after: Essays reflecting on Lord Scarman’s report, the riots and their aftermath*. Ed. J. Benyon. Oxford: Pergamon p.85.

⁴³ Acting Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Tim Godwin stated before a Home Affairs Committee that: ‘It was because the number of sites of disorder was something we had not witnessed in the city before, and that did take us by surprise...the speed with which people took advantage of police officers being elsewhere was something we have not experienced before’. House of Commons oral evidence taken

before the Home Affairs Committee: *Policing Large Scale Disorder*. Tuesday 6 September 2011. Replies to Q73 and Q100.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhaff/uc1456-i/uc145601.htm>

⁴⁴ In 1981 the police of course had full command and control centres using a radio communications net whilst the rioters were limited to a few CB kits and its unclear how widespread or useful these were in practice.

⁴⁵ Jordan Blackshaw, 21, and Perry Sutcliffe-Keenan, 22 from Cheshire were jailed for four years for ‘Using Facebook

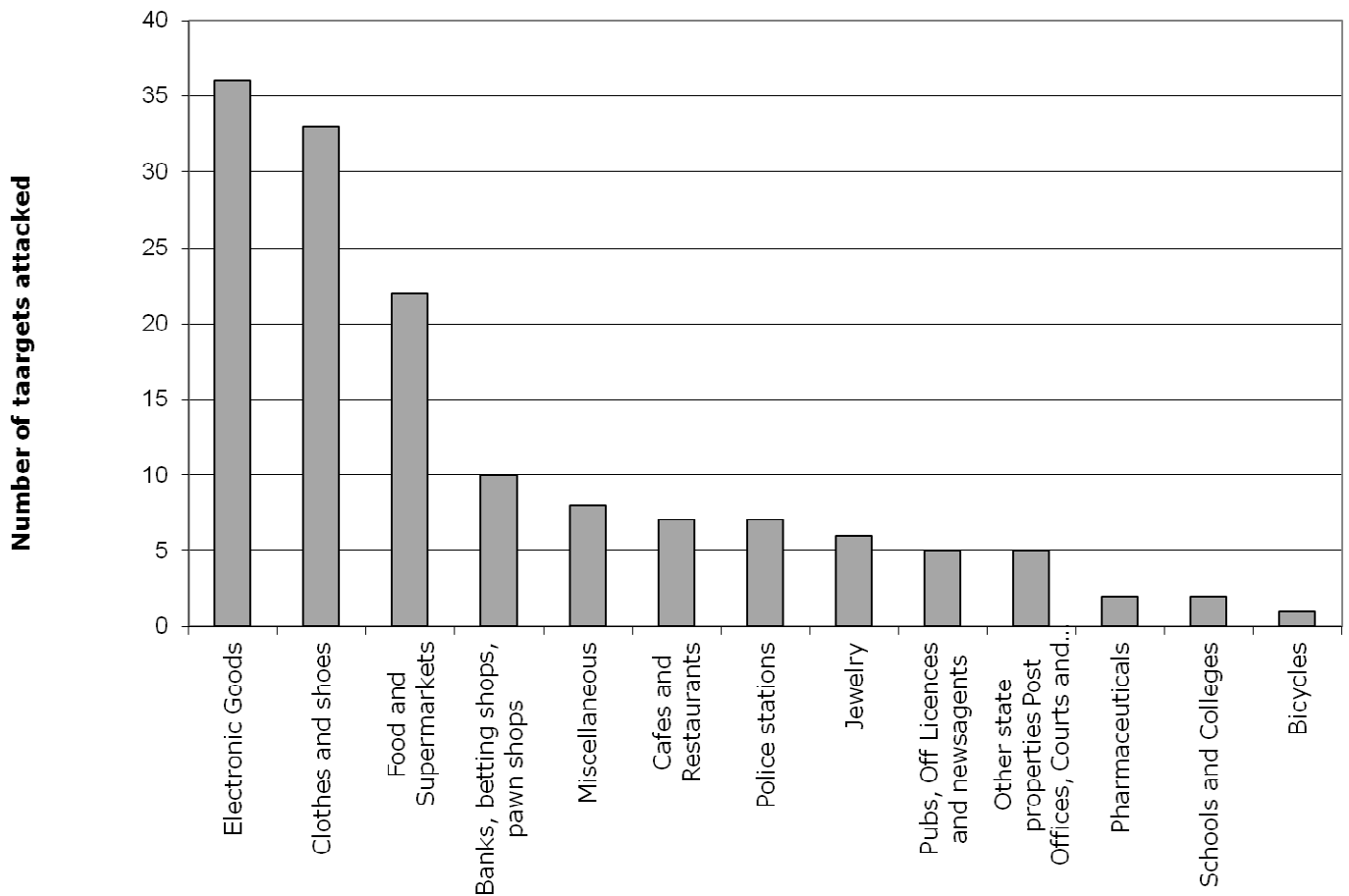


Figure 3: An analysis of target types attacked during the 'riots' of 6th-9th August 2011

LOOTING, TARGETS, PARTICIPATION AND POLICING

Looting: the 'facts and figures'

Politicians and journalists, during and after the unrest, emphasised the damage and loss to 'local shops' and to 'family businesses'. Most of the interviews that were conducted in the media concentrated on non-chain local retailers (e.g. the petit bourgeoisie), whereas the actual capitalists (who owned the major chain outlets) generally appeared in the financial sections. The propaganda reasons for this approach were obvious, the need for human interest stories (not so easy when referring to Tesco or JD Sports), the need to assert 'community' or 'big society' cross-class cohesion in 'riotous' areas (despite real material divisions) and an attempt to generate fear amongst proletarians they were the target of the 'rioters' in August (which in general they

weren't). However, apart from these anecdotal stories it was difficult to assess from an overall perspective in the media what types and sizes of businesses had actually been damaged, looted and/or burnt during the unrest.

The results are presented in Figure 3, and demonstrate that nearly two-thirds of the targets were related to the appropriation of electronic goods, clothes and shoes and food and drink.⁴⁶ The vast majority of the recorded attacks in the sample were aimed at major chain stores, with around 7% being designated as 'non-chain local shops'.⁴⁷ These figures are supported by the fact that across the cities affected by the unrest twelve major shopping centres, malls and retail parks, often a significant distance from residential areas, were specifically targeted for appropriation.

Although these statistics provide significant evidence to undermine the media and government propaganda which portrayed the 'rioters' as *largely* targeting 'small shops' in their areas of residence, it does not entirely support the idea that their motives were to ignore small local

to encourage disorder, sought to organise criminality similar to events elsewhere', a 17-year-old from Suffolk 'Told friends on Facebook they should start rioting' and got a 12-month youth rehabilitation order, including a ban on using social media with a curfew and 120 hours community work and David Glyn Jones from Bangor posted a message that appeared for 20 minutes declaring: 'Let's start Bangor riots' and was jailed for four months under the Communications Act. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14595102>

⁴⁶ Top of the 'target league' were JD Sports (shoes/clothes), Argos (electronic goods) and Tesco (food/drink).

⁴⁷ It should be noted that the sample may be distorted by a lack of reports on damage to 'local shops'; however, despite this, their numbers are clearly much lower than the chain stores that were attacked.

businesses on the basis of 'community cohesion'. In fact, it may merely be the product of the economic and spatial restructuring of the 'local high street' over the last forty years.

For example in April 1980 in the St. Paul's district of Bristol, a 'riot' which broke out in the afternoon after an aggressive police raid on a café (an important community location on the 'frontline') led to the police completely withdrawing from the area for four hours. During this time collective, selective and *negotiated* 'looting' occurred. What is interesting is that of the forty-five commercial and state targets available in the immediate area under the control of the 'rioters', nineteen were selected for attack. Of these, fourteen were looted, about half of the 'high-value' targets available.⁴⁸ Technically, most of the available targets could have been considered as 'local shops and businesses'. Comparative analysis of the area in 1973 showed that by 1980 St. Paul's had *lost nearly half of its shops and businesses* due to economic decline, road building and residential development of the 'inner-city' during the period.⁴⁹ This process has continued apace, with the accumulation of many small outlets into larger chains and their relocation to peripheral 'car-friendly' malls and retail parks.

Several years ago, there was a significant 'concern' in sections of the media (and some political parties, particularly the Greens and Lib-Dems) that the 'traditional, local High Street' in British cities was disappearing *altogether*.⁵⁰ Despite the ravages of inner-city economic decline in the 1970s, it was still possible to appropriate high value goods (such as motorbikes, bicycles, TVs, radios, hi-fis etc.) in 1980 *within these areas*. By 2011 this was far less likely. Consequently, ironically echoing the calls of many political 'riot cheer leaders' to not '*shit on your own doorstep*' and to instead attack concentrations of non-local, large commercial targets, the 'looters' of 2011 had

⁴⁸ Study in 'Violent urban disturbance in England in 1981' R. Ball Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of West of England 2011.

⁴⁹ This study was undertaken using *Kelly's Bristol Directory*. 1973. Kingston upon Thames: Kelly's Directories and *Yellow Pages: Bristol*. 1980. Post Office Yellow Pages.

⁵⁰ Some commentators argued that the only remaining 'authentic High Street' in British cities was the Gloucester Rd. in Bristol, ironically close to St. Paul's and the scene of 'rioting' in April and August 2011. Recent figures released in *The Guardian* demonstrated the dramatic effect of the recent and ongoing economic recession on High Streets in the U.K. The article stated: '*Are high-streets coming to an end? The Local Data Company has released a report detailing empty shops across the country's high streets. It looks at vacancy rates in town centres, which are standing at around 14.5% across the country - three times what they were in 2008*' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/sep/08/high-street-vacancy-rates-retail>

in fact no choice but to follow this path if they wanted to appropriate 'high value goods' (or any goods at all in some residential areas!). So the axis of looting in 2011 may merely have been a product of capital's spatial restructuring of 'shopping areas' and thus generated the characteristics of mobility, planning and use of vehicles that are required to collectively appropriate distant targets.⁵¹

This point is important, as the 'local shop' versus 'chain store' morality argument that was significant in the both the 'green, liberal and traditional Conservative' arenas prior to the 'riots' of August and the anarchist and left-wing media in their aftermath. This terrain of debate often fails to recognise that the so-called 'local community' contains significant material class divisions (proletarians, petit bourgeoisie and 'middle-class'), all of which have been exacerbated by the restructuring and gentrification of inner-city areas over the last 30 years. As some female participants in 'looting' famously related to a shocked BBC reporter after a night of unrest in Croydon in August:

Reporter: 'But this is like local people, I mean why is it targeting local people, your own people?'

Participants: 'It's the rich people, it's the rich people, **the people who have got businesses** and this is why all of this has happened, because of the rich people. So we were just showing the rich people we can do what we want.'⁵²

This was regarded as one of the most shocking⁵³ interviews throughout the whole media circus of August, as it demonstrated proletarian disdain for bourgeois concepts of 'local community' and highlighted the class divisions therein.

Capital's restructuring of commercial retailing in cities and towns, which of course in the last three years alone has done far more 'damage' to the 'local High Street' and the 'local community' than all of the proletarian shopping in August 2011, is perhaps the key to understanding the spatial anatomy of the looting, rather than the moral arguments of political commentators on the right and (unfortunately) the left.

⁵¹ These behaviours and tactics in August 2011 were thus far closer to the experiences in the disparate districts of the post-modern city of Los Angeles in the 'riots' of 1992, than they were to the 'riots' in England in 1981. See 'LA '92: The Context of a Proletarian Uprising' in *Aufheben* #1 (Autumn 1992) at <http://libcom.org/library/la-riots-aufheben-1>

⁵² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14458424>

⁵³ What seemed to shock the bourgeois commentators most of all was the girls' happiness and laughter.

Intended targets and 'collateral damage'

The iconic images of burning buildings in London that so mesmerised the nation in August (and *Aufheben's* graphics) were used by the media to spin a story of random attacks by 'looters' and 'rioters' on people's homes.⁵⁴ These 'human interest' stories, which portrayed 'innocent victims' preyed on by 'feral arsonists' were central to the narrative of psychopathic behaviours amongst the 'rioters'. However, extensive analysis of the targets of the arsonists and 'rioters' in August has failed to locate a single serious *selective* attack on a private home.⁵⁵ All of the private homes that were destroyed by fires were as a result of arson attacks on commercial premises which either lay below these homes or adjacent to them. This is certainly not an attempt to justify this activity, but instead to place it in its proper context. People's homes *were not the primary or even secondary targets* of 'looters and rioters'; else scenes of burning neighbourhoods, reminiscent of organised sectarian attacks in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 70s, would have filled our screens. Instead they were effectively 'collateral damage'.

Many of the stories surrounding these iconic events contained interesting sub-plots. For example the BBC TV programme *Panorama*, interviewed a family who lived above the Carpetright shop on Tottenham High Rd. (see front cover) where 26 flats were destroyed by a fire set in the store beneath on the night of Saturday 6th August. After several calls for help to the police without response the father stated:

'We heard a banging on our door and I opened the door and it was a youth who didn't live in the building, saying the building has been set on fire and 'get out'. I actually thought the guy was trying to get us out in order to get into our flat. We were basically abandoned by the emergency services, we were under siege and they were out to murder us.'⁵⁶

The contradictions in this statement are obvious; the family were not the object of a siege, were not the targets for murder or even burglary and were technically saved by a 'rioter'. The

⁵⁴ One of the most enduring images was the photograph of a woman leaping into the arms of riot police from a burning building in Croydon
<http://www.tarlani.com/2011/08/london-riots-woman-leaps-from-burning-building-in-dramatic-scene-photos/>

⁵⁵ The only two incidents of note occurred in Oxford and High Wycombe and involved the breaking of a window in each case.

⁵⁶ 'The August Riots' BBC *Panorama* 15th August 2011 (00.06.30)
http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b013xy9t/Panorama-The_August_Riots/

'human interest' story of the 'caring feral rioter' was certainly not going to be headline news, despite its veracity.

Of course, as has already been noted, certain groups were *specifically* targeted by the rioters, primarily the police and in a very few cases emergency services personnel such as fire-fighters. Another dangerous occupation was being a journalist or photographer. In August a number of videographers and cameramen were confronted by members of the crowds '*asked if they were feds*' and then attacked and robbed of their equipment.⁵⁷ This was certainly a feature of the unrest in the 1980s where taking pictures of 'rioters' was regarded as effectively holding the keys to a cell and the crowds acted accordingly. Within weeks of the 'riots' of August 2011 footage of the disturbances was being legally seized from major news organisations by the police authorities.⁵⁸ This action appeared to vindicate the attacks on journalists by 'rioters' and led one NUJ official to state:

'By handing over footage, these media organisations have turned every photographer, videographer and journalist into potential targets and this will only lead to an increase in the number of assaults on the press while covering events.'⁵⁹

He was quite right.



⁵⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/09/london-riots-photographers-targeted>

⁵⁸ These included the BBC, ITN, Sky News and the Daily Telegraph. Court orders were served by Scotland Yard using clauses in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/sep/22/bbc-itn-sky-news-riots>

⁵⁹ <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=47933>

Crowd composition and 'social deprivation': Lies and damned lies....

So who were the 'looters' and the 'rioters'? This was the question that concerned both the liberal and right-wing press after August. Effectively there were two parallel interpretations concerned with the composition of the crowds.

The first, which fulfilled a general 'law and order' agenda and rejected any concept of 'social deprivation' as a cause, emphasised the cross-class make-up of those arrested. Using exceptions, such as an Olympic ambassador, a 'ballerina', a millionaire's daughter, estate agents, social workers and students,⁶⁰ some media asserted the bourgeois (and Hobbesian) notion of '*we is all bad*' and thus we need the state and the discipline of laws to keep us in line, else we would descend into the savagery inherent in 'human nature'.

The second and more sophisticated approach, whilst alluding to 'social deprivation' (in the liberal press), argued that the 'sheer criminality' was the product of a specific 'feral criminal underclass' whose self-organised activities had mutated well beyond 'normal and decent behaviour'. This view was propagated in particular by the Tory-Lib Dem government in the aftermath of the disturbances.⁶¹ It was also linked to the concept (and 'folk devil') of 'gang culture' and famously racialised in a TV interview by the historian David Starkey.⁶²

The supposed evidence for the latter position was provided by an analysis of arrestees in the aftermath of the August 'riots'. The Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke stated:

It's not yet been widely recognised, but the hardcore of the rioters were in fact known criminals. Close to three quarters of those aged 18 or over charged with riot offences already had a prior conviction⁶³

⁶⁰ For example, see the views of 'The Sun' newspaper in <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article3747365.ece> and <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article3745609.ece>

⁶¹ For example, the Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/05/kenneth-clarke-riots-penal-system>

⁶² The Prime Minister, David Cameron made these emphases in a speech to the House of Commons on 11th August when he stated: '*This is not about poverty, it's about culture. A culture that glorifies violence, shows disrespect to authority, and says everything about rights but nothing about responsibilities.... At the heart of all the violence sits the issue of the street gangs. Territorial, hierarchical and incredibly violent, they are mostly composed of young boys, mainly from dysfunctional homes.*' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14492789>. The Starkey interview can be watched at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14601813>

⁶³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/05/kenneth-clarke-riots-penal-system>

This supposedly cast-iron evidence for a 'criminal underclass' being behind the August 'riots' was deeply flawed. Several researchers into urban 'riot' have pointed out that the number of arrests is often unrelated to the severity of 'riot', neither do they necessarily represent a cross section of the participants.⁶⁴ In 2011, this was exacerbated by the use of CCTV. Essentially four categories of 'rioter and looters' could be isolated, based on two sets of criteria, masked up and not masked up, previously known to the police and not known to the police. It is obvious that the most likely group to be arrested in the aftermath of a disturbance using CCTV footage are those that were *not masked up* and were *previously known to the police*. This is because having a CCTV image of a suspect is not much use if you don't have an existing named photograph to compare it to. The second most likely group to be arrested were those who were *not masked up* but were *unknown to the police*. In this case the police were relying on members of the public who recognised them to grass them up. The least likely category of 'looter' to be identified were those who were *masked up* and *not previously known to the police*. It thus comes as no surprise that the arrestee statistics in August 2011 were biased primarily towards those with (extensive) criminal records whose faces were not covered and secondly those (casual or opportunistic looters?) who had no previous record and were unmasked.

This argument was partly corroborated by Acting Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Tim Godwin, who stated in evidence to a Home Affairs Committee that:

Most of the gang members we do in fact know. Most of the gang members we have active investigations against, so they were the ones that we scooped up first off, which is why the percentage was higher at the beginning⁶⁵

A more useful statistical survey looked at the home neighbourhoods of those arrested. The BBC published an analysis of 147 arrestees in Manchester, which showed (unsurprisingly) that:

⁶⁴ See for example Peach, C. 1986. A geographical perspective on the 1981 urban riots. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 9 (3). pp.397-8, Cooper, P. 1985. Competing explanations of the Merseyside riots of 1981. *British Journal of Criminology* 25 (1). p.63 and Keith, M. 1987. 'Something happened': The problems of explaining the 1980 and 1981 riots in British cities. In *Race & Racism: Essays in Social Geography*. Ed. P. Jackson. London: Allen & Unwin. p.97.

⁶⁵ *House of Commons oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee: Policing Large Scale Disorder*. Tuesday 9 September 2011. Reply to Q87. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhaff/uc1456-i/uc145601.htm>



'some people are charged from areas of every level of deprivation... most are charged from areas of higher deprivation, with over a third (36.1%) of all those charged in the tenth most deprived areas'

And the BBC commentator came to the stunning conclusion that:

'It doesn't mean poverty caused the crime, of course, but there is something about being poor that makes it more likely an individual became involved'

Other findings in the report contradicted the propaganda, which suggested the centrality of 'teenage gangs and children':

'The data also suggest those characterising the riots in Manchester as the work of juvenile gangs are mistaken. The average age of those charged in the city is 24, the youngest 12 and the oldest 58. Only one in ten of those charged were under the age of 16'⁶⁶

These and other findings, which countered the more simplistic representations of a criminal underclass comprising 'feral youth' and 'juvenile gangs' began to make an impression and by early September the Home Secretary Theresa May was shifting the Government's position:

'Mrs May told the Home Affairs Committee on Thursday that the Metropolitan Police and other forces were looking at the number of people arrested with known

gang affiliations - **the percentage of which had fallen over time, as total arrests had risen.** About 25% of those arrested were juveniles, she said. The committee has already heard evidence that about 19% of those arrested in London were gang members - down from almost a third of those initially arrested. "On current evidence it would seem that the majority of people involved were not individuals who've been involved in gangs"⁶⁷

'Cops, slaves to the commodity'

What were the cops doing in all this? There was some outrage in the bourgeois press that they apparently 'stood by' and let the 'rioters' do what they wanted. Clearly they didn't always 'stand by', since they were 'proactive' in Hackney and certain other places, and they protected some places but not others. Yet some of those on the side of the 'rioters' have also seen something sinister in the sight of cops standing back from burning cop-cars and from certain attacks on property.

In the otherwise really good YouTube film 'Rebellion in Tottenham',⁶⁸ the fact that the cops apparently allowed people to trash and burn two of their vehicles is interpreted by some speakers as a deliberate ploy; the cars were left there so that people would attack them so that the cops would then be able to legitimately escalate their riot tactics. The cops deliberately escalated the riot, apparently.

Where have we heard this kind of explanation before? Almost every time there is a kick-off, it seems. According to one of the Militant stewards at the time, the great poll tax riot of 1990 was set

⁶⁶ The survey carried out by the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research is at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14807665>

⁶⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14834827>

⁶⁸ 'Rebellion in Tottenham' (Reel News 2011) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Faysa6h0IR8>

up by police 'agent provocateurs'; apparently, the cops, working at the behest of the government, 'wanted' the riot in order to 'discredit' the anti-poll tax movement.⁶⁹ Similarly, when the Tory headquarters at Millbank got trashed at the student demo last year, there was a claim that the lack of cops outside was evidence of a conspiracy to make the student movement look bad. On the student demo two weeks later, the police van abandoned in Whitehall was supposedly left there 'deliberately' so that people would trash it, to discredit the protest and to give the cops an excuse to attack the crowd (which they were kind of doing anyway with an indiscriminate 'kettle' of all and sundry).

These kinds of explanations are typically premised upon an understanding of 'politics', within which the cops and the crowd are competing to win over an audience in the 'middle ground' who only support 'rioters' when they are victims. These kinds of explanations are politically disempowering, for the 'victims' are inevitably outwitted by the Machiavellian planning and superior anticipation of the super-intelligent cops. If such conspiracy theories are true, there is no point taking action for the real action takes place behind the scenes.

However, explanations such as this are rarely true and in general are complete bollocks. The supposed clever strategies of the cops at the poll tax and the student demonstrations appear to have backfired somewhat, for it was the cops who were the losers and victims, the ones treated for post-traumatic stress disorder and made to look

like incompetent fools, while the movements each took encouragement from the events.

In the case of Tottenham, there is a simpler and much more plausible explanation for what happened that night than cop conspiracy. One of the main concerns for the cops when the cars were burning and they stood back was most likely to be Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the 'right to life'. In other words, they stood back because they believed that someone could have died if they got stuck in; and if it was a toss up between a car and a life the choice was obvious to them. They didn't want to risk either another Blakelock⁷⁰ (corporate manslaughter) or killing a rioter, with all that would have implied for an escalation - *against them*. Acting Assistant Chief Constable Tim Godwin of the Metropolitan Police stated to a Home Affairs Committee after Tottenham:

I think we would be having a different conversation if we had a young person on life support at the moment as a result of a brain bleed or some other injury. I take great pride in the fact that we filled up prison places as opposed to hospital beds⁷¹

So from their perspective it was a good result - because nobody got killed. In general, the cops simply are not sophisticated or organized enough to plot in the way that some people imagine. They just react from one set of circumstances to another; and, in many cases (poll tax, Millbank)



⁶⁹ For example this was the angle alluded to by Militant anti-poll tax federation organisers Wally Hammond and Bill North in a Radio 4 programme. 'In Living Memory' (12th March 2008). <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0093ws4>. See also the otherwise excellent video 'Battle of Trafalgar' by Despite TV.

⁷⁰ P.C. Blakelock was killed during the Broadwater Farm 'riot' in Tottenham in October 1985.

⁷¹ *House of Commons oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee: Policing Large Scale Disorder*. Tuesday 6 September 2011. Reply to Q109. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhaff/uc1456-i/uc145601.htm>



'cock-up' is simply a far more plausible explanation for what the cops are up to than conspiracy.

During the 'riots' in London in August, it took the Metropolitan Police two days to assemble 1,900 officers trained in public order (riot police) after the incident in Tottenham.⁷² On the first night (Saturday) they had 480 available for duty and on the Sunday evening 1,275⁷³ for the whole of Greater London. As senior officers explained, the 'thin blue line' was spread *very thin* and these logistical problems were compounded by the rapid and diffuse spread of disturbances in the capital as well as the intelligent manoeuvring of the looting crowds. By the time the Met had procured enough riot units to potentially control the situation, *the horse had already bolted*. These concrete factors are far more realistic explanations for the apparent 'lack of action' by the Met, than conspiracies based around 'police angry about cuts' and sinister stories of them 'allowing it happen' for hidden political reasons.

What is more interesting were the tactics employed by the various constabularies. Thirty

years before in 1981 the police had (similarly) been caught hopping by the scale and ferocity of the initial 'riots' in Brixton, London (April) and Toxteth, Liverpool (July). Although at the time partially tooled up with large unwieldy riot shields, their initial tactics essentially involved static phalanxes of police officers plodding (sic) on foot slowly forward in an attempt to retake neighbourhoods under the control of rioters. As a result, their casualties in the face of missiles and petrol bombs were massive. The escalation and modification of policing tactics, particularly in Manchester over 7th-9th July 1981, were a direct result of the injuries sustained by police and their perception of 'defeat' during their deployment to the neighbouring city of Liverpool in the preceding Toxteth disorders. These new tactics included the use of mobile police units, 'snatch squads' to target 'ring leaders' and most controversially the use of semi-armoured police vehicles as high speed battering rams to break up crowds. This aggressive policing style, previously unseen in mainland Britain (though developed and long-used by the security forces in Northern Ireland), was a significant factor in the suppression of further disorders in Moss Side and Greater Manchester over the following week. Their 'successful' use in further disturbances in Toxteth later in that month led to a death and serious injuries to several 'rioters'.⁷⁴

In August 2011, a similar pattern emerged, however this time the police were already 'tooled up' to a much greater degree. Failures to effectively disperse crowds in Tottenham and other areas of London on Saturday and Sunday night led to the deployment of armoured vehicles in several locations in London during the third night of rioting (Monday 8th). These 'Jankels' (see Figure 1) were used to scatter crowds and drive them out of contested areas. Assistant Commissioner Steve Kavanagh of the Met. stated:

'The use of armoured vehicles driving at speed towards these looting individuals is a new tactic never used before. It's quite shocking for the people of London to see that's what we have to do'⁷⁵

Despite Kavanagh's lack of historical knowledge of policing, it appears that many in the Met saw these 'old tactics' from Northern Ireland and July 1981 as the way forward. Whilst giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in September, Hugh Orde president of the

⁷² This was out of a total of 2,500-3000 in the Met.

⁷³ Assistant Commissioner Lynne Owens. *House of Commons oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee: Policing Large Scale Disorder*. Tuesday 6 September 2011. Reply to Q82. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhaff/uc1456-i/uc145601.htm>

⁷⁴ A disabled man, David Moore, was run down and killed by a police van that drove at high speed into crowds in Toxteth on July 28th 1981.

⁷⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2023984/London-riots-2011-Where-police-Shopkeepers-mystified-theyre-left-defenceless.html>

Association of Chief Police Officers stated more accurately:

'The tactics that were found to be effective were the vehicle tactics. Vehicle tactics are not new and they do exist in the manual. They have not been used routinely on the mainland, for want of a better description. They have been used routinely in Northern Ireland. The tactic exists'

He went on to note:

'It would be highly unlikely to use, for example, vehicle tactics against political protests **unless they got extremely violent**. So the tactics cover a range of things from peaceful crowd containment right through to the firing of baton rounds and use of water cannons.'⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated using the empirical evidence available that the August 'riots' of 2011 were in general characterised by the appropriation of goods from major retail outlets. Although initially precipitated by the shooting of Mark Duggan and a 'community riot' in Tottenham

where the principal target was the police, the disturbances spread rapidly as 'commodity riots' across London and eventually major conurbations in the West Midlands, Liverpool and Manchester. Access to electronic devices servicing social media appeared to have accelerated the diffusion of disturbances in comparison to those in July 1981. The spatial restructuring of local shopping streets into more distant retail parks and shopping malls encouraged mobility and organisation amongst the 'looters'. Although there was significant 'collateral damage' to homes due to arson, the primary targets for collective violence were the police and major retailers. Although politicians and journalists attempted to portray the crowds as principally composed of 'gang members' or a 'criminal underclass', this characterisation was far from clear-cut and is not supported by the evidence. Failures of policing, though highlighted by the media, were a result of surprise, lack of trained personnel and logistical problems rather than 'conspiracy'.

A forthcoming *Aufheben* article will review and critique the various explanatory frameworks for the August 'riots' that were offered both in the mainstream and by the left and right. It will also consider the responses in the 1980s and now by the state and capital.



⁷⁶ House of Commons oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee: Policing Large Scale Disorder. Tuesday 6 September 2011. Reply to Q138 and Q139. Our emphasis in bold.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmsellect/cmhaff/uc1456-i/uc145601.htm>