Understanding the English 'riots' of 2011: 'mindless criminality' or youth 'Mekin Histri' in austerity Britain?

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Abstract:

The mainstream view permeating media and political discourses following the 2011 'riots' in England is that the disturbances are evidence of a moral decline and mindless criminality, implying that the nation's more settled traditions have been corroded. As a consequence, the policy response emerging in the aftermath of the troubles prioritises punitive welfare and criminal justice sanctions aimed at restoring 'decent' traditional values and ways of behaving. This article argues that these mainstream responses are not only based on a flawed understanding of England's past traditions but that they also fail to acknowledge the deteriorating socio-cultural context of life in post-industrial, austerity Britain, particularly as it affects young people marginalised by 'race' and class. Thus the policies currently pursued are unlikely to address the deep-rooted underlying structural causes of the widespread discontent and outrage expressed, however inchoately, during the disorder.

Key words: Neoliberalism, austerity, young people, 'race', class.

THE KEY RESPONSE from the political elite to four nights of disturbances in various parts of England in August 2011 was that the events were apolitical and represented 'mindless criminality' ('pure and simple') – a view consistent with neoliberal realist explanations of the urban unrest of the last three decades (Hasan, 2000). It is a reaction that fails to engage meaningfully with the causes of the disorder – in particular, the reasons for the anger that fuelled the violence that ensued. Moreover, the policy responses introduced by the Conservative-led coalition government will consequently fail to solve the 'long-standing areas of social difficulty that are deeply ingrained in the social landscape' (Pearson and Sinclair, 2011: 4). The aim of this paper is to offer an alternative reading of the events of August 2011, one that particularly focuses on the sense of disenfranchisement felt by many of those demonstrating their anger and correspondingly, on the political nature of the events.

The key incident that sparked the unrest is indisputable – false accounting by the police, and acceptance of this by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), of the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan on 4th August 2011 by a police officer during an attempt to arrest him near Tottenham Hale station, north London. The IPCC investigating the killing admitted misleading

the media – both the *Evening Standard* and *Daily Mirror* cited an IPCC spokesperson stating that a police officer was shot first, then Duggan (Lewis and Laville 2011). This was untrue. On 6th August, at a meeting called by police, local community leaders warned that there could be serious disturbances if local concerns regarding Duggan's death were not addressed. That evening, a peaceful protest march set off from Broadwater Farm to Tottenham police station where, on arrival, the marchers requested to speak with a senior officer.

> *When something bad occurs affecting the fragile relationship between the police and the black community in Tottenham – a controversial arrest, a death in custody – people march to the police station* (Muir, 2011: 8).

David Gilbertson, chief superintendent in Tottenham in the 1990s, describes the traditional response to such a campaign:

> *We often had marches to the police station. ... You get the most senior person you can out on the street to speak to the organisers. You say 'come into my office and talk'. That always defuses the situation* (Gilbertson, cited in Muir, 2011: 8).

On this occasion, for whatever reason, the police failed to find a senior officer to meet with the protestors. In addition to the initial misrepresentation of Duggan's killing, a long history of 'stop-and-search' against young black men in the area, the memory of those who had died as a consequence of police operations in 1985 (Cynthia Jarrett), 1993 (Joy Gardner) and 1999 (Roger Sylvester), and anxieties caused by public spending cutbacks and rising unemployment (Muir 2011) were enough to ignite the disturbances.

> *The alleged failure by the IPCC to provide Duggan's family and the local community with reliable information in the aftermath of his death was part of the reason the relatives protested outside the police station …. The peaceful demonstration later descended into rioting and looting that, within days, had inspired 'copycat' disorder across England* (Lewis and Laville, 2011: 5).

This article begins with an analysis of mainstream readings of the disturbances in media and political discourse, interpretations which reveal a new fascination with the cultural deficit of the 'underclass' (a 'mob' of 'yobs' and alien cultures; immoral, disrespectful, criminal, undisciplined, materialistic and hedonistic), and the inefficiencies of public sector organisations, particularly the police and schools. It argues that these explanations offer limited understanding, rooted as they are in positivist/realist insights that de-contextualise the nature of the problem whilst serving to legitimise reactionary societal responses (moral panics) and policy solutions (punitive welfare and criminal justice sanctions). What is absent from these overly-deterministic readings is attention

to the changing socio-cultural context in post-industrial England, particularly as it affects young people marginalised by 'race' and class. In order to address this lacuna, an alternative perspective of the disturbances is offered, illuminated by the wider socio-cultural context shaping these events. The focus chosen explores the consequences of three decades of neoliberal restructuring and the effects this has had on the social, economic and political context shaping the life chances and experiences of marginalised young people. Analysing the troubles in this way allows us to glimpse the deeper structural causes of the widespread discontent and outrage expressed and thereby to generate more meaningful strategies to address these.

The August 2011 disorder – mainstream readings in media and political discourse

The August 2011 disorder in England has led to a renewed fascination in mainstream media and political discourse with the cultural 'deficit' of disadvantaged 'communities', predominantly related to age, 'race' and the 'underclass'. On August 9th, following three-days of disturbances, the British press ran with the headlines: 'Rule of the mob' (*Daily Telegraph*), 'Anarchy' (*Sun*), 'Flaming Morons' (*Daily Express*), 'The Anarchy Spreads' (*Daily Mail*), 'Anarchy in the UK' (*Daily Star*),'Mob Rule' (*Independent*) and 'Yob Rule' (*Daily Mirror*). In terms of television news coverage, the troubles turned into an immediate media event with 24-hour rolling coverage of burning buildings and vehicles, hooded youth and a carnival of hedonistic looting. Such reportage contributes little understanding of the nature of the disorder or how to address it. As Tony Jefferson argues, when such representations are rolled out uncritically via 24-hour news bulletins, tabloid newspapers and social media sites, the opportunity arises for what Stan Cohen (2004) identified as 'deviancy amplification' (encouragement to join it), and the production of 'folk devils' (defined as a threat to societal values) and 'moral panics' (public clamour for more punitive criminal justice sanctions) (CURB, 2011).

Commentators adopting an extreme right perspective have attempted to racialise the disturbances. On BBC's Newsnight, David Starkey qualified Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in arguing that 'chavs … have become black. The whites have become black. A particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic gangster culture has become the fashion' (O'Carroll, 2011: 7). The influence of 'black' consumerist icons also came under the media spotlight: the 'gangster-chic' fashions of Adidas Originals, K-Swiss and Fred Perry were criticised by Mark Borkowski, a so-called 'branding expert', for 'aligning themselves with gang and criminal culture for decades' (Neate et al, 2011: 11); meanwhile, in the *Daily Mirror*, Paul Routledge condemned rap music for its 'pernicious culture of hatred', glorification of 'violence and loathing of authority (especially the police but including parents)' and exaltation of 'trashy materialism and … drugs' (cited in Hancox, 2011: 12). Racialising the disturbances in these ways potentially threatens community cohesion by pathologising elements of 'black' culture.

The Conservative-led coalition government's discourse on the troubles emphasised immorality and criminality. Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, characterised the 'rioters' as 'a vicious, lawless and immoral minority' (cited in Slovo, 2011: 45). Prime Minister David Cameron argued that the troubles were a symptom of a 'slow-motion moral collapse' in Britain's 'broken society' (cited in Travis, 2011a: 5). Cameron's suggestion is that the British traditionally held clear moral boundaries, a proposition Geoffrey Pearson's (1983) study of respectable fears clearly repudiates.[1] In Cameron's mind, society has become broken in relation to:

> *… schools, welfare, families, parenting, addiction, communities; on the cultural, legal,*
> *bureaucratic problems in our society too; from the twisting and misrepresenting of human*
> *rights that has undermined personal responsibility, to the obsession with health and safety*
> *that has eroded people's willingness to act according to common sense*
> (David Cameron, cited in Stratton, 2011: 4).

Restoring personal responsibility and, thereby, moral boundaries would require the erosion of human rights – particularly in relation to due process and social welfare. In the aftermath of the troubles, Cameron announced a two-pronged approach he termed 'social fightback'/'security fightback'. The former would aim to inculcate in parents the idea of rights with responsibility: 'keep your benefits, your children and your home and in return be a responsible mother, father and neighbour' (cited in Ramesh and Wainwright, 2011: 4).[2] The latter would embrace plans to widen police powers, including authority to impose immediate curfews and encouragement for greater use of baton rounds, rubber bullets and water cannons (Travis, 2011a).

Thus far, liberal commentators in the media, such as the Guardian/London School of Economics Reading the Riots project, have emphasised discriminatory policing as a key cause of the disturbances (*Guardian*/LSE, 2011). The Reading the Riots methodology was modelled on a survey conducted in the aftermath of rioting in Detroit in 1967 – The People Beyond 12th Street: A Survey of Attitudes of Detroit Negroes After the Riot of 1967 – which also concluded that a key cause of the riots was grievances about police brutality (Younge, 2011). Similarly, Waddington and King's comparative study of riots in France and Britain since the 1980s suggests that long periods of deteriorating relations between police and young people was a major contributory factor in both countries (Waddington and King, 2009). This was also revealed in the first citizens' inquiry into the riots held in Tottenham where a key source of the troubles was identified as 'toxic relations with local police' (Lewis, 2012a: 1). This focus on the conflictual relationship between a discriminatory racist police system and (largely black) marginalised communities discounts wider structural factors and substantive questions, paving the way for managerialist adjustments to policing practices aimed at assuaging 'public concerns'.

Whilst the coalition government refused to establish an official inquiry into the disturbances, in

September 2011, Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg launched the Riots Communities and Victims Panel (RCVP). Its concern focused on the views of communities and victims about the causes of the troubles and what can be done to prevent them from reoccurring. Its interim report highlighted 'much distress and anger in communities about the police response. It is crucial that the police rebuild trust' (RCVP, 2011: 3). Building trust here is explained as 'ensuring plans are in place to deal with the risk of future disturbances, pursuing people who committed the crimes during the riots and supporting communities as they rebuild. We are aware that as a consequence of these riots, the police have begun a review of their tactics on how to handle future riots' (RCVP, 2011: 3). By early 2012, the coalition government was planning policing reforms aimed at addressing grievances in relation to stop-and-search and more particularly, the public's clamour for more 'effective' policing of future unrest (Lewis, 2012a). The report of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, commissioned by Home Secretary Theresa May, recommended a shift in police tactics in preparation for future riots – including the use of plastic bullets and water canons (Travis, 2011b). In the foreword to the RCVP's final report (2012), Darra Singh, the chair of the panel, reiterates its two main concerns: what can be done to build the social and economic resilience of people in areas affected by the riots, and how better to organise public services and hold them to account. Schools in particular were singled out as needing to do more to build character (RCVP, 2012). Latterly, news coverage increasingly focused on the question of police tactics, and whether or not the police had sufficient resources to deal with the disorder (Sandvoss, 2011). These explanations of the 'problem' remain culturally-deficient communities and failing public services.

Other post-riot reports have emphasised a materialistic/hedonistic side to the disturbances. The Children's Society (2011) report claimed that the main motive behind young people participating in the riots was 'to get goods and possessions they could not afford to buy' (Children's Society, 2011: 2). This view is shared by the British Youth Council's (2011) online survey which emphasised the chance to get free stuff in addition to poor parenting, lack of respect for right and wrong, and lack of jobs and opportunities (British Youth Council, 2011). The exaltation of materialism was central to David Lammy's explanation of the troubles. In 'Out of the Ashes: Britain After the Riots', Lammy, MP for Tottenham, described the events as 'an explosion of hedonism and nihilism' (cited in Matthews, 2011: 7) – added to which, 'a continual lack of education, ineffective parental guidance, poor role models, ill-discipline, unemployment and a host of social and developmental ills created the ideal conditions for a riot' (Matthews, 2011: 7). The focus again is cultural deficit, moral collapse and the need for people to become more resilient.

In general, these mainstream readings are largely embedded in positivist/realist understandings highlighting the threat of flawed 'alien cultures', the immorality and criminality of the 'underclass', dysfunctional places and inefficient public sector bodies. They are readings that find support from within academia – see, for example, Simon Winlow on 'grab-what-you-can' hedonism; Nicholas Pleace on 'localities of perpetual riot' which leak into 'the surrounding civilisation';

Steven Hirschler on threats to society from 'an intruding foreign element'; Sheldon Thomas on 'gang mentalities' whose angst is drawn from moral breakdown; David Hill on the impact of engaging online on our moral inhibitions; and Simon Harding on the 'mindful' violence generated by existing urban street gangs (CURB, 2011: 2-5). The policy responses legitimated by these explanations of the disorder include punitive welfare and criminal justice sanctions, managerial adjustments to the workings of public sector bodies and calls for improvements in situational crime control. What is missing is any acknowledgement of the changing socio-cultural context for living in post-industrial England, particularly for marginalised young people.

In the next section, we explore possibilities for developing a more considered understanding of the disturbances, one that is sensitive to the wider socio-cultural context within which the events occurred. As Loïc Wacquant argues, explaining such events in terms of mere criminality or cultural deficit is unhelpful. Instead, there is need for:

> … *more complex and differentiated pictures of the 'wretched of the city' if we wish accurately to capture their social predicament and elucidate their collective fate in different national contexts* (Wacquant, 2008: 2).

The focus offered here is upon three decades of neoliberal social restructuring and the effects of the hollowing out of the welfare state and widening social inequality on well-being in British society. In analysing the troubles in this way, we offer a lens through which to glimpse the deeper structural causes of the disorder and, as a corollary, more meaningful insights into potential solutions. Drawing largely upon the work of Henry Giroux, the spotlight is the contemporary plight of young people in England, particularly those pushed to the margins of society by virtue of their 'race' and class, and who are increasingly denied 'opportunities for self-definition and political interaction, … [and] representational status as active citizens' (Giroux, 2012: xiv). This focus reveals the way large numbers of young people are routinely deprived of the social protections necessary for living healthy lives in the present and for envisioning a sustainable existence in the future. As Stuart Hall has argued, not only acknowledging young people's social and economic marginalisation, but also their political powerlessness, is central to understanding the nature of the events of August 2011:

> *The riots bothered me a great deal … [N]othing really has changed. Some kids at the bottom of the ladder are deeply alienated, they've taken the message of Thatcherism and Blairism and the coalition: what you have to do is hustle. Because nobody's going to help you. And they've got no organised political voice, no organised black voice and no sympathetic voice on the left* (Cited in Williams, 2012: 4).

Hall's position is shared by Sandvoss who, whilst acknowledging the protestor's lack of clear political demands, argues:

What has largely been missed in the broadcast and print media coverage of the riots is that the disenfranchisement of those demonstrating their anger from wider political processes and a sense of public sphere and democratic space, does not mean that such anger lacks causes that are both ideological and political ranging from wider questions of social inequality, injustice and poverty to the narrowly political such as the austerity drive and dramatic reductions in public spending. … When anger can no longer find a constructive trajectory, it translates into the indiscriminate, random and futile postmodern violence that becomes an aim in and for itself – and to which there hence can be no remedy, no meaningful political answer: because it cannot even formulate the challenge it poses (Sandvoss, 2011: 1).

Martin Luther King once defined rioting as the language of the unheard – an option for those who feel a deep sense of unease but lack political voice. This was a view expressed by a youth worker shortly after the 2011 disturbances in Tottenham:

[Young] people don't have a voice and it has been like that for such a long time. I have spoken to some and they didn't regret it. To them they made a point in the only way they could (Sabrina, cited in Muir, 2011: 9).

The lack of a coherent programme of demands or collective voice through which to express this is crucial to an understanding of why so many young people participated. As Slavoj Žižek observes:

The fact that the rioters have no programme is … itself a fact to be interpreted: it tells us a great deal about our ideological-political predicament and about the kind of society we inhabit, a society which celebrates choice but in which the only available alternative to enforced democratic consensus is a blind acting out. Opposition to the system can no longer articulate itself in the form of a realistic alternative, or even as a utopian project, but can only take the shape of a meaningless outburst (Žižek, 2011: 2).

Žižek points to a fatal weakness of the disturbances – 'they express an authentic rage which is not able to transform itself into a positive programme of sociopolitical change' (Žižek, 2011: 5) – yet finds significance in this for developing understanding. It points to the need to analyse and evaluate the wider socio-cultural context for growing up in England, especially that for marginalised young people.

The wider socio-cultural context of the August 2011 disorder

The following analysis locates the events of August 2011 within their broader socio-cultural context – a context that mainstream representations thus far have failed to acknowledge. Three

decades of neoliberal social restructuring in Britain has hollowed out the social protections, educational opportunities, job prospects, and spaces for political engagement that previous generations could access. The ideological shift from Keynesian welfarism to neoliberalism at the heart of mainstream politics started in the late 1970s, has generated a socio-cultural context consumed by commercialism, individualism and the imperatives of an unfettered free-market economy. In parallel, social solidarities and support for collective solutions to societal problems have evaporated, and any notion that the social state should support young people to realise their hopes and ambitions is now derided. The institutional support networks available to young people for much of the post-war period – comprehensive health care, affordable council housing, opportunities to enter higher education or paid employment, social security, and well-resourced youth centres – have been eroded, leading to increasingly fractured youth transitions (Yates et al, 2010). As a corollary, widening social inequality – a fundamental cause of community tensions and violence in developed societies (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) – and unacceptable levels of child poverty – 30% of children in the UK, around 4 million, live in poverty in what is one of the world's most developed economies (Topping, 2012) – have been sustained. The well-being of young people in particular has declined in Britain over the past two decades (Cooper, 2010). Contemporary social problems that appear visible to the public – such as living on the street or the need to survive by begging – are increasingly responded to with punitive criminal justice sanctions rather than solidaristic welfare solutions. Even traditional youth leisure activities, such as hanging around public spaces with friends, now risk criminalisation. In public places, black young people in particular are likely to be treated with suspicion and contempt, and subjected to disproportionate policing. There has been little serious attempt to redress racism in the police service despite the Macpherson inquiry (Kwesi Johnson, 2012). As recently as March 2012, it was reported that the Crown Prosecution Service decided that no charges should be brought against police officers from Newham who had subjected a young black man, arrested during the August 2011 unrest, to a torrent of racist abuse including '"The problem with you is you will always be a nigger" … [and being strangled by a police officer] because he was "a cunt"' (Lewis, 2012b: 1). Estelle du Boulay, director of the Newham Monitoring Project, stated that the treatment of 'this young man at the hands of police officers – both the physical brutality … and the racial abuse … – are by no means unusual; it compares to other reports we have received' (cited in Lewis, 2012b: 2).

Wacquant's comparative study of post-industrialisation in Europe and the US – contrasting the 'slow *decomposition* of the working-class territories' (Wacquant, 2008: 9 – emphasis in original) of the banlieue in France with the '*implosion* of the black ghetto' (Wacquant, 2008: 259 – emphasis in original) in the US – illustrates the socio-cultural effects of advanced marginalisation under neoliberal capitalism. Whilst the processes of marginality by 'race' and class are different, the outcome is the same: persistent poverty, social isolation and alienation (Wacquant, 2008). Moreover, in both Europe and the US, Wacquant identifies the emergence of a 'criminology of intolerance' (Young ,1999, cited in Wacquant, 2008: 262) with governments increasingly adopting punitive criminal justice sanctions to deal with social problems – a process he describes as the criminalisation of misery

…via the punitive containment *of the poor in the increasingly isolated and stigmatized neighbourhoods in which they are confined, on the one hand, and in jails and prisons which operate as their spillway, on the other* (Wacquant, 2008: 277 – emphasis in original).

The policing and incarceration of the poor in these ways enable the state elite to legitimate itself by 'responding to the demands of the "people" while at the same time exculpating its own historic responsibility in the making of the urban outcasts of the new century' (Wacquant, 2008: 12). The failure of governments

…converted to neoliberalism to check the social and spatial accumulation of economic hardship, social dissolution and cultural dishonour in the deteriorating working-class and/or ethnoracial enclaves of the dualizing metropolis promises to engender abiding civil alienation and chronic unrest which pose a daunting challenge to the institution of citizenship (Wacquant, 2008: 7).

Social cohesion around citizenship is threatened both by the exacerbation of social exclusion and the criminalisation of the social problems resulting from this. In Britain, this is evidenced by the increasing threats to citizenship rights announced by Cameron following the August 2011 troubles (alluded to earlier). These have resulted, for instance, in Conservative-controlled Wandsworth council, south London, commencing eviction procedures against a woman whose son appeared in court charged with rioting in Clapham Junction. Even though the woman had not been involved in the riots and her son had not been convicted, Cameron backed the action: 'I think for too long we have taken too soft an attitude to people who loot and pillage their own community. If you do that you should lose your right to housing at a subsidised rate' (Cameron, cited in Topping and Wintour, 2011:1). Such policy sanctions – including cutting the benefits of 'rioters' – were described by Imran Hussain, head of policy at the Child Poverty Action Group, as 'a recipe for exclusion and social division' (cited in Jones and Bowcott, 2011: 5). At the same time, those convicted of 'rioting' have been subject to disproportionate sentencing. Magistrates were advised by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to disregard normal sentencing guidelines when dealing with those convicted – resulting in cases that would normally be dealt with in the magistrates courts 'being referred to the crown court for more severe punishment' (Bowcott and Bates, 2011: 7). In the House of Commons, Cameron called for those convicted of violent disorder to be imprisoned. Wilson Unses Gracia was jailed for six months for receiving two tennis racquets worth £340 looted from a sports shop in south London. The court was informed that 'Gracia, who pleaded guilty, had not participated in looting, did not agree with the rioting and had accepted the racquets from a man … as payment of a £20 debt' (Bowcott and Bates, 2011: 7). A student who took £3.50 worth of bottled water from a supermarket was jailed for six months (Travis and Stratton, 2011). Perry Sutcliffe-Keenan and Jordan Blackshaw – two men who had used Facebook to advocate rioting in their home towns, Warrington and Northwich respectively – were both sentenced to four years'

imprisonment. Nobody had turned up at the appointed meeting points and no rioting had broken out as a result of these postings. Moreover, when Sutcliffe-Keenan woke up the following morning with a hangover, he removed the site he had created and replaced it with an apology (Bowcott et al, 2011).

In Britain, democracy itself is under siege, and the political establishment increasingly manipulated by powerful media and financial corporations. Under neoliberalism, all forms of public life, including education, are subjected to the dictates of the market whilst democracy itself loses 'any vestige of ethical, political, and social considerations' (Giroux, 2011: 77). There is little encouragement under neoliberalism for young people to develop politically – as active, socially responsible, democratic citizens – or for a 'public discourse that envisions a future in which human suffering is diminished while the general welfare of society is increased' (Giroux, 2012: xiv). Under neoliberalism, non-commodified societal values and public spaces 'that keep alive issues of justice, ethics, public opportunities, civic courage, and critical citizenship' (Giroux, 2012: xvii) are being closed off. Increasingly, the ability of young people to actively engage in political protest is restrained. The policing of student protests in late 2010 saw the deployment of 'kettling' where thousands were held for hours without access to food, water or toilets (Lewis, 2012c). Kettling 'has become increasingly common since it was used to contain anti-capitalist demonstrators in 2001' (Lewis, 2012c: 20). It is a clear breach of the rights of peaceful protestors amounting to a form of mass detention (if not unlawful imprisonment) ordinarily reserved for keeping rival football supporters apart (a similarly questionable action). Yet it is a strategy that has 'been used – to varying degrees – at almost every large-scale demonstration in the past three years [2009-2012]' (Lewis, 2012c: 20). Perhaps one of the most callous examples during this period was the containment of young 'schoolchildren late into the night in freezing conditions' (Lewis, 2012c: 20) at the 2010 student demonstration. Such oppressive policing of political protest has been sanctioned by the European Court of Human Rights, depriving us of the right to voice dissent (El-Enany, 2012).

Higher education institutions, where one might expect unfettered criticality to flourish, are also deploying authoritarian tactics to silence dissent. For example, the University of Cambridge suspended a PhD student, Owen Holland, for seven terms for his role in a protest against David Willetts, higher education minister. During a speech by the minister, Holland read out a poem that included the lines: 'You are a man who believes in the market and in the power of competition to drive up quality. But look to the world around you: your gods have failed' (cited in Vasagar, 2012:10). Such sanctions go against Giroux's notion of the need for education systems to provide 'students with a public space where they can learn, debate, and engage critical traditions in order to imagine otherwise and develop discourses that are crucial for defending vital social institutions as a public good' (Giroux, 2011: 81). The education system under neoliberalism is failing young people by leaving them uneducated, jobless and without hope – a factor Boris Johnson, Conservative London mayor, believed was responsible for the '"nihilism" and exclusion revealed by the riots' (Wintour

and Mulholland, 2012: 1). In a survey of 512 teachers by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), more than a third admitted they were under pressure to improve their student grades by cheating – for instance, by rewriting student work to manipulate results. A secondary school teacher reported that maintaining the school's status in league tables 'took precedence over developing the abilities of pupils' (cited in Shepherd, 2012a: 11). Such forms of instrumental rationality, working to principles of standardisation and measurable utility, merely 'serve the interests of a closed and authoritarian social order' (Giroux, 2012: 57). In such a context, possibilities for offering the kind of critical pedagogy needed for generating an open democratic society remain remote. There is a clear need here to broaden the nature of the debate from neoliberalism's material injustices to its harmful effects on democratic public spheres – that is, upon those:

> *… institutional and cultural spaces in which people are presented with the time and opportunity to understand and influence the larger educational forces and politics that shape their lives. Such public spheres are crucial features of a civil society that supports the bonds of sociality and reciprocity in addition to individual self-determination. Educational and other public spheres are spaces of politics, power, and authority that require constant questioning in order to enable people to imagine changing the world around them so as to expand and deepen its democratic possibilities* (Giroux, 2012: 55).

This comes close to Badiou's argument in his discussion with Žižek on the purpose of philosophy for contemporary times:

> *Today's great question is not the critique of capitalism, on which more or less the whole world is in agreement with regard to the appalling material injustices …. The real question is that of an affirmative proposition regarding democracy, as something other than the consensus on the parliamentary form of politics.… [T]he truly risky philosophical imperative, the one that really poses problems for thought, is the critique of the democratic form as we know it* (Badiou, cited in Badiou and Žižek, 2009: 89-90).

The banality of western democracy is captured in Žižek's account of Bush's 2000 election 'victory'. Despite the controversy of the manipulated return in Florida, there was little or no protest from Democrats because

> *…there were rules that had to be upheld no matter what. And therefore democracy means today in the first place, even in the case of vulgar injustice, 'injustice rather than disorder', as Goethe is supposed to have said* (Žižek, cited in Badiou and Žižek, 2009: 94).

A similarly banal account is that of the recent high court ruling in England on a petition made by two teenagers that the Coalition government's trebling of tuition fees breached their human rights

and equality legislation. While the judges accepted that some students would be discouraged from applying to university, and that the government's analysis of equality issues failed to comply with public sector equality duties, Lord Justice Elias stated that:

> … *he did not consider it would be a 'proportionate' response to quash the decision to raise fees to up to £9,000 a year and argued such a move would trigger 'administrative chaos'. However, he said Vince Cable, the business secretary, 'failed fully to carry out his public sector equality duties. … [T]he secretary of state did not give the rigorous attention required to the package of measures overall, and to that extent the breach is not simply technical …'* (Shepherd, 2012b: 6).

Despite this breach, Lord Justice Elias added:

> *[A]ll the parties affected by these decisions – government, universities and students – have been making plans on the assumption that the fees would be charged. It would cause administrative chaos, and would inevitably have significant economic implications, if the regulations were now to be quashed* (Cited in Shepherd, 2012b: 6).

Social injustice is judged preferable to administrative chaos.

Increasingly under neoliberalism, notions of citizenship, welfare rights, social justice and democracy have been undermined, closing off opportunities for the many, particularly the many young people disadvantaged by virtue of 'race' and class, to hold any responsible political influence in the public sphere. It is a socio-cultural context that increasingly serves the interests and imperatives of an elite social class whilst maintaining the marginalisation and disempowerment of the many. It is this socio-cultural context that lies at the heart of the events of August 2011. In the final section, we explore possibilities for generating a different context for life in England, one better able to counteract the disabling effects revealed by the riots of three decades of neoliberal restructuring.

Countering the nihilism and social exclusion revealed by the riots

The contemporary plight of many young people in England is one of disenchantment due to an absence of the economic, social, political and educational conditions that make the present liveable and the future sustainable. In such a socio-cultural context, 'a riot was just waiting to happen' (Kwesi Johnson, 2012: 34). Despite strong empirical evidence that 'riots' are motivated in the context of profound social grievances, Theresa May rejected such assertions, arguing instead that these were 'excuses'. Referring to the Guardian/LSE (2011) study, May argued:

> *What the LSE/Guardian report tells me more than anything is that the rioters still have not*

accepted responsibility for their actions. …The riots weren't about protests, unemployment, cuts …. The riots were not about the future, about tomorrow. They were about today. They were about now. They were about instant gratification (Cited in Ball and Taylor, 2011: 12).

Despite such states of denial, this is not borne out by the discontent expressed by many who participated in the troubles. For example, Joe, who was involved in violence at Salford's central shopping precinct, sees himself as part of a generation losing all hope:

People are sayin' 'how are people going to get a job round here tell me now? …They [employers and the older generation] *look at us, yeah and they say 'fuck it, youths mate' that's all they think. People …that have got a good qualification and shit like that, they're not getting jobs because of what they look like. It's not on. …It's like I say, all the upper generation are judging the lower generation because they think they're fuckin' bastards. …I'm at the job centre most days of the week …I'm trying my hardest. I've got CVs and everything bro, I still try, I still do all this shit, I still don't get nothing. I don't get nowhere because of what we look like. You get what I'm sayin' …. At the end of the day, they think we're youths and the youth generation today goes mental.* [But] *we don't go mental, we don't want no trouble. We just want a job. I'm happy to do hard work, decent work* (Cited in Malik, 2011: 6).

A recent survey of 1,500 16-24 year olds, conducted under Professor Tony Chapman at the University of Teesside, reflected Joe's concern about age discrimination. 57% of respondents believed that employers were discriminating against them because of their age and that around 25% were depressed about their future. In contrast to the hedonistic consumerist lifestyles some commentators assume young people aspire to today (see, for example, Hall et al, 2008), Chapman argues:

All the academic research seems to demonstrate that [young people] *want a secure living environment, they want to have a good relationship, and if they want to have children, they want the best possible opportunities for their kids and they want secure jobs* (Cited in Malik, 2011: 6).

There is a growing realisation among English youth in particular that such social stability is unlikely to be realised – particularly since the hiking of student fees, the abolition of the education maintenance allowance and rising youth unemployment (Malik, 2011). Trisha, a 27-year old child psychology graduate from Middlesex University who looted a supermarket in Hackney, argues that:

Not even people that's got an education can get a job, much less people that ain't got

education. I went to university and I still ain't got a job. ... I'm still paying my student loan. That's why I looted all I could. ... Cameron [is] doing nothing but talking shit in parliament. They do not know what it is like for us young British people. They don't live in our shoes. They have no idea what it's like. Telling us we're milking benefits off the system. What kind of bullshit is that [for] *someone who is on 50 grand per annum?*[3] *... I just want a decent job to pay my rent and not have to worry about claiming benefits. I don't want to be on fucking benefits* (Cited in Malik, 2011: 6).

Hesketh Benoit, a youth worker, also highlighted the discontent felt by many who participated in the troubles:

Youngsters are being stopped and searched; 75% cuts in youth provision; youth not listened to. EMA has been cut. Youths feel they get qualified and there are no jobs. This was the last straw. After the riots they feel they have been listened to. Even if they go to prison, they feel they have been listened to. It took the riots (Cited in Muir, 2011: 9).

The prominence of young people amongst the participants in the riots reflects their profound unhappiness with the contemporary order of things. It is this unhappiness that should be the focus of analysis and evidence for systematic change rather than reform. As Giroux argues:

At this moment in history, it is more necessary than ever to register youth as a central theoretical, moral, and political concern. ... Youth provide a powerful referent for a discussion about the long-term consequences of neo-liberal policies, while also gesturing towards the need for putting into place those economic, political, and cultural institutions that make a democratic future possible. ... Clearly, the issue at stake here is not a one-off bailout or temporary fix, but real, structural reforms (2012: 7).

If we are serious about addressing the significant gaps in understanding about the events of August 2011, we need to examine the effects of the collapse of the post-war Keynesian-welfare 'settlement' from the 1970s on the socio-economic and political architecture in Britain (Hall, 2011), and on the wellbeing of young people, their families and communities. This requires some acceptance of the disturbances' deep political significance.

Countering the nihilism and social exclusion revealed by the riots will require the reconstruction of the democratic public spheres of civil society 'where democratic ideals, visions, and social relations can be nurtured and developed as part of a genuinely meaningful education and politics' (Giroux, 2012: 8). Central to such a project is the need to reclaim education as a public good 'committed to teaching young people about how to govern rather than merely be governed' (Giroux, 2012: 7). We need to imagine education systems that not only provide young people with the knowledge

and skills necessary for the world of work, but also those that enable engagement in the public sphere as critical, responsible and active citizens – conditions necessary for restoring social cohesion, wellbeing and democracy, values that have been eroded by three decades of neoliberal social restructuring. Such an image is consistent with Aristotle's vision of the good society and the importance of education for enabling citizens to attain human fulfilment. Aristotle believed that democracy and democratic education systems were crucial for enabling:

> *…people to join together and set up clubs, associations, networks, communities of friends, which can practise philosophy and reason their way to the common good. And the solutions they come up with will be better than in the tyranny where only a handful of minds are engaged. In a democratic society, everyone is thinking, everyone is engaged* (Evans, 2012: 215).

In England, the roots of such imaginings appeared within the University and College Union's (UCU's) campaign for a manifesto in defence of public education. Summing up the launch of this campaign in March 2012, Tom Hickey, Chair of UCU Recruitment, Organisation and Campaigning Committee, spoke of the need to 'name' (in Freirean terms) the relationship between education and society, and the centrality of education not only for the economy, but also critical citizenship, democracy, social wellbeing and cohesion (Hickey, 2012). Because of its importance for healthy democratic societies, education, as with health care, needs to be universal, free at the point of delivery at whatever level. Privatised systems – as promoted in the US and England – work against these principles (Giroux, 2012).

Arguably in England, throughout much of the post-war period, a key source of support for young people's social wellbeing and inclusion has come from progressive developments in the field of youth work. Youth work is one of the few areas of welfare organising that carries a specifically democratic mission, involving 'a social responsibility to include young people, a concern to empower them and enable them to participate' (Unite, undated: 25). This is not far short of Aristotle's philosophical position on the importance of group work and the need for us to work together, collectively, in pursuit of the common good (Evans, 2012). However, despite the clear benefits youth work brings to the lives of many young people, youth work practice has come under assault from the Conservative-led coalition. As a consequence of the government's austerity cuts, many youth projects across England have closed down. According to research conducted by the Confederation of Heads of Young People's Services, some councils were cutting up to 100% of its youth service and 3,000 youth work jobs have been lost in 2011/12 (Williams, 2011). The detrimental effects of such actions have not been lost on young people themselves. 18-year old Chavez Campbell, from Wood Green, north London, had been interviewed by the Guardian a week before the 'riots' about the likely impact of cuts to youth services. Campbell predicted 'There'll be riots' (cited in Topping, 2011: 7).

I did see the riots coming and the government should have seen it coming, too. Jobs are hard to get and, when they do become available, youth don't get the jobs. There is nothing to do, they are closing youth clubs so the streets are just crazy. They are full of people who have no ambitions, or have ambitions but can't fulfil them (Campbell, cited in Topping, 2011: 7).

The recent closure of youth centres has been seen by some as a contributory factor behind the riots. London's inner-city estates have been particularly hit. In Haringey, youth project funding has been cut by 75% and eight of the borough's 13 youth clubs shut. As Symeon Brown, founder of community group Hype – Haringey Young People Empowered – states:

Normally the summer university would be running; most of those rioting on the streets would last year have been attending courses. ... Youth clubs provide safe spaces and it does become political for kids when they see them closed down. It's a message to them that no one cares, the politicians don't value them enough to provide a service. Young people see politicians cheating, rich people not paying taxes, police not serving and protecting but shooting or beating people in custody, so they think why consent to a system that is not legitimate? (Cited in McVeigh, 2011: 19)

Joe Ejiofor, a local ward councillor and chair of the community forum, adds:

People are angry. Even if you agree with the narrative that says cuts in youth services had nothing to do with causing the riots, surely it is essential that we put more money into youth services and job creation now (Cited in Muir, 2011: 9).

The approach to education practised by many youth workers has served the interests and wellbeing of many young people for many decades, a factor acknowledged at Ministerial level – 'youth work is a highly effective approach for supporting personal and social development' (DfE, 2011: 1). What makes youth work's approach so effective is its focus on the holistic development of young people, including working 'to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential' (DfE, 2011: 1). Central to the approach is encouragement for young people to shape the activities they engage in – ensuring that these activities start from 'where young people are' (DfE, 2011: 3). Not only should the coalition government reverse its assault on the youth service; it should commission research into the transferable benefits of its style of pedagogy for mainstream schooling.[4]

If we are to effectively address the social exclusion and political disempowerment of young people in England, particularly those marginalised by 'race' and class, there is urgent need to reconstruct a socio-cultural environment supportive of their immediate desires and future aspirations. Achieving this will require substantive structural change, and the reconstruction and protection of a public sphere supportive of social and material wellbeing, and dialectical democratic engagement.

Conclusion

Situating the disorder of August 2011 alongside other expressions of mass protest by young people in England helps to illuminate the ravaged socio-cultural context driving such events – a context that governments wedded to neoliberalism have been complicit in generating for three decades. One thing the 'riots' did – alongside the student protests emerging from 2010 and the activities of the Occupy movement – is send out a message to the British establishment that many young people are no longer prepared to simply accept the authority of a morally bankrupt, irresponsible and repressive regime that has failed them.[5] In this respect, such disturbances represent, as Linton Kwesi Johnson's poem written from the perspective of the 1981 Brixton 'riots' explained, young people 'Mekin Histri' (Kwesi Johnson, 2012: 34) through their expression of rage, however unconstructive and inchoate the trajectory of this expression appeared. Thus far, mainstream politics has similarly failed to engage constructively and meaningfully with the socio-cultural causes and political significance of this rage – responding, instead, in ways that merely legitimate the advancement of the ideological imperatives of neoliberal Conservatism through welfare retrenchment and tighter criminal justice sanctions. These measures may contain the symptoms of the disturbances short term, but the socio-cultural context driving the events of August 2011 remains with distinct possibilities that history will soon repeat itself.

Notes

1   Pearson's thesis is that violent social disorder in Britain is never new and represents a long-standing social difficulty. He traces this back from the social concern about Teddy Boys in the 1950s to the alarm about 'juvenile delinquency' pre-World War Two, 'hooligans' in the late 1890s, 'garrotters' in the 1860s, 'juvenile depravity' in the 1840s and 1850s, and unruly apprentices in pre-industrial society (Pearson, 1983; Pearson and Sinclair, 2011).

2   The ideological thinking behind this 'says welfare benefits are a privilege and not a right, and those who choose to break the law should be treated as outlaws and forced to live outside the law and, for that matter, society' (Travis, 2011a: 5).

3   When Trisha hears that Cameron earns well in excess of that 'she can't believe it' (Malik, 2011: 6).

4   One benefit of the youth work approach was revealed in the second Guardian/LSE report on *Reading the Riots*, released in July 2012, which included a suggestion for why rioting did not occur in all areas of social deprivation. Focusing on the case of Chapeltown, Leeds, where the killing in August 2011 of an African-Caribbean, Gavin Clarke, by an Asian, Afzal Arif, generated two nights of skirmishes, the report evidences how community and

youth work interventions – in contrast to a police response – were successful in dissuading potential rioters and containing the situation (Clifton, 2012). Similar preventative action was successfully taken by social entrepreneurs, working with community leaders, in other parts of the country including Bolton (Unltd, 2011). This presents an ominous warning to a government embarking on severe cuts to community and youth work funding.

5   In effect, in Weberian terms, the 'riots' arguably represent a legitimation crisis for a Conservative-led coalition government already lacking a popular mandate to rule – only 36.1% of those who turned out to vote in the 2010 election (a turnout of 65.1%) voted Conservative (effectively, just over 2 out of 10 people eligible to vote supported the Conservatives).

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