

Short Communication

Grounding the Riots

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Considerably more data on the August riot of 2011 was released by the Government (through the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office) and other bodies (the media, the Metropolitan Police) than has ever been released on previous riots. This is to be welcomed. Of course (and as *Radical Statistics* is dedicated to exposing) such data cannot be taken at face value nor does it allow us to ask the *why?* questions we need to ask – particularly if framed in a political economy perspective. But it does go some way towards sketching in a social profile of those who were involved in the riots.

A decade ago, serious disturbances broke out across the Northern ex-textile towns of Burnley, Oldham and Bradford. Bradford in particular was engulfed by one of the most extensive riots in Britain for twenty years. Jenny Pearce and I recently published an account of that riot based on several years of research (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning: The 2001 Bradford Riot and Beyond*, Bujra and Pearce, 2011). There was then no access to social data on the rioters and we faced considerable resistance in our attempts even to list those who had been arrested, eventually succeeding only with the help of the police who had requested and funded our (at that point) small study into ‘why did the rioters riot?’ We then constructed our own 20% random sample of all adults who had been convicted of riot offences and received a custodial charge.

It is worth noting that the social profile of these men (only one woman was convicted but fell outside our sample) was almost identical to that of the August rioters - they were young, poorly educated and from deprived areas of Bradford. The majority in our sample were manual workers with a few in routine white collar jobs, and about a quarter unemployed. The only key distinction compared to last year’s rioters was that they were predominantly of Asian Muslim backgrounds – in other words this riot had an ethnic edge to it that was not there in August. (Having said that, it seems clear that issues of racism, particularly in the flashpoint incident of the shooting of Mark Duggan, led to a disproportionate representation of black people in the August riots in London in particular – see amongst other reports, Hugh Muir in the *Guardian*, 6 Sept 2011). A social profile tells us nothing about why these particular social categories were involved, leaving the field open for moral diagnoses which often substitute abuse and denigration for analysis. These were prominent in explanations of

Bradford's riot of 2001, and more recently Kenneth Clarke's designation of a 'feral underclass' puts rioters outside of human society, whilst David Starkey on *Newsnight* pointed to a deviant 'black culture' as a key factor, and the public liberally supplied epithets like 'scum'. Identifying cultural or personal deficits which can be blamed for the collapse of public order is a position frequently adopted by those in authority, serving as dismissal and denial of the (albeit fleeting) threat to established power and capitalist social relations which the riotous rejection of social norms represents. It was also espoused by many ordinary people unnerved and outraged by the prolonged looting and the threat to lives from arson and violence.

Finding support for an alternative view needs more than statistical evidence. We used our sample as the basis for a qualitative in-depth investigation of the rioters' backgrounds, claimed motivations and actions, interviewing them at considerable length, mainly in the prisons to which they had been sent. We backed this up with our local knowledge and previous research into the history and social dynamics of Bradford. We also extended our study to similarly lengthy interviews with police who had been involved – and not only the top spokespeople but rank and file officers who had been on the front-line of the violence. Finally, through networking we interviewed other participants – families, youth workers, mediators, left-wing anti-racist activists and others. We were also observers of the events and sometimes participants in the aftermath as Bradford tried to come to terms with the experience of riot. In other words we had first hand and in-depth knowledge of the context of the riot that we could mobilise to make sense of the events. We were also steeped in the history of a city which had once been a global textile giant and was now reeling from decades of industrial decline. This was course localised contextualisation – additional questions arise and other modes of research need to be employed to make sense of the August riots where unrest spread from London to other urban centres as diverse as Manchester and Gloucester.

Martin Kettle (in the *Guardian*) recently pleaded for researchers and decision makers to talk to the August rioters, rather than imputing motives to them for their actions. In the August riots perhaps the most challenging aspect was the extensive looting and arson, which has tempted even some on the left, such as Zizek, to put words into rioters' mouths: 'You call on us to consume whilst simultaneously depriving us of the means to do it properly...!', (LRB on-line August 2011). A project (*Reading the Riots*) which has involved interviewing rioters has been attempted by Tim Newburn at LSE in conjunction with the *Guardian*. However, 'talking to rioters' is far from a simple solution – locating a representative category of people to talk to, creating some rapport with them so that they share genuinely held views and then coming to terms with a range of different accounts which present competing versions of 'the truth' all present challenges. Truth is clearly refracted through social positionality. One example of this is that

most of the Bradford rioters claimed a political agenda for their actions in 2001 – namely that they were defending the city, their homes and communities, from the threat of National Front incursions. This claim was derided – the riot was largely seen by local police and politicians as criminal activity, lacking a ‘cause’. It was easy to dismiss the rioters’ views – they were young, inarticulate and spoke with local accents, and their violent outburst was spontaneous, without leadership and organisation through which political demands might have been voiced. There were no manifestos, speeches, banners, or interviews with the press. Although one of the Asian Muslim rioters argued that the point of a riot was ‘to get police and council to listen to what people have to say’, they had no means to get their views across. And whilst the Far Right made some ugly early intrusions on the day of the riot, they then faded away, leaving local lads fired up facing their other enemy, the police. In the end the major battle was not with contingents of the Far Right, but with the police, who had responded to early signs of unrest in a heavy-handed way and drew further anger by appearing to be protecting the Far Right. The police then found themselves locked into a confrontation from which they were unable to escape for many hours. And this riot too ended in a form of looting – the torching of a luxury car showroom in the middle of urban deprivation, with young men smashing up and joy-riding BMW cars around the surrounding streets. Talking to the rioters disclosed their own struggles to make sense of these unfolding events – certainly they had no single message to explain their actions.

The way in which riots are policed is clearly crucial to their impact and extent. It was our view that only if the police and other influential parties were prepared to recognise the deep feelings of grievance – and most particularly in this case the fear and hatred generated by Far Right propaganda and threats of provocative action – would they be able to prevent another similar riot. Such a recognition requires talking to rioters and taking their views seriously. In the event, this message did get through. When the English Defence League announced a demonstration in Bradford in 2010, police, the local authority and a range of activists worked together to pre-empt violent confrontation and to reassure local youth. This time the police positioned themselves in such a way that they appeared to be protecting the local community from racist provocation and they tightly controlled the EDL protestors, marshalling them both into and out of the city. Of course this robust response introduces new contradictions – is ‘kettling’ more acceptable when it is applied to the Far Right rather than to the Left? Does containment work or does it deepen the anger? (see Hancox 2011). The difference in this case was that the EDL agreed to containment as the price it paid for the chance to provoke Bradford youth. And in August last year, when many other urban centres in England were erupting into riot, Bradford remained calm.

It is as difficult to explain why events did not transpire as it is to explain why they did. The mix of factors that stirs a population into anarchic violence is too complex to allow us to predict exactly where or when riots will or will not take place. Both flashpoints of unrest and the context within which they occur are relevant (Waddington et al, 1989). The most recent 'English riots' were as unexpected as those of ten years previously. As contradictions within capitalism deepen however, social unrest and violent outbursts are moving beyond specific locales blighted by the disintegration of manufacturing industry and the working populations it supported - which was the background to the Bradford riots. They are now spreading into the wider economy, especially the most active centres of commerce and finance and outward from the most deprived towards politicising a more vocal group extending to the 'squeezed middle' classes. Given the ways that capitalism has expanded globally through continual exploitation of new sources of labour power, the unrest now often has an ethnic dimension, and as each new generation finds its chances of a secure livelihood put in question, young people are to the fore of the responses. In Bradford, a sense of more wide ranging and legitimate grievances - about injustice, economic hardship and insecure futures - might be drawn from the accounts of the rioters, but without an organised movement to articulate demands, raise political awareness and draw people into cohesive and effective action, the anger was easily dissipated into violence. This does not mean that their riot, and the recent 'English' riots, was not expressive of grievance about gross social and economic inequalities - or more potently about a looming downward shift in life-chances for the most deprived in society - the gulf of inequities widening as cuts in welfare services combine with rising unemployment. And indeed, the prevailing economic climate continues to reproduce hopelessness and bitterness which is likely to flair into violence again.

References

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