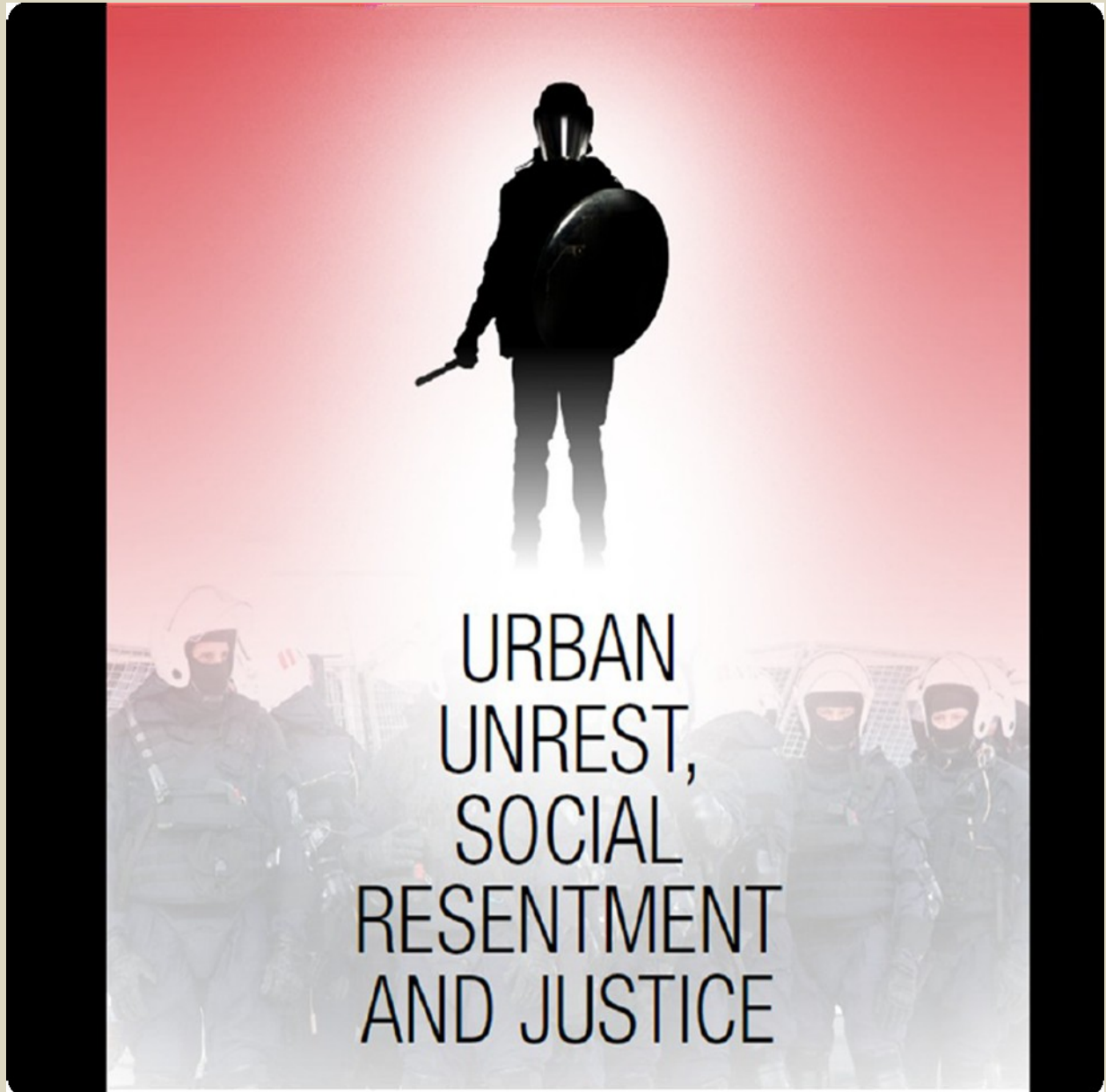


Unrest16

Preliminary investigations and analysis of the riots of August 2011



THE UNIVERSITY *of York*



This brief document provides an entrée to the discussions about the roots of the UK riots in the summer of 2011 aired at the **Urban Unrest, Social Resentment and Justice** meeting. This was organised by CURB (the Centre for Urban Research) at the University of York in September 2011. The event was organised as a 'rapid response' to the riots in order to provide a space for reflections and deliberations on the forces underlying the events. The disproportionate sense of social crisis, superficial media coverage and heated political commentaries that emerged during that short period lead many social analysts to believe that little has changed – either in the way that poverty, political exclusion and policing operate in British cities, nor the way in which social elites respond to such issues. Importantly there was little insight or understanding to be found, only punitive and concerted forms of condemnation that do little to generate confidence that the roots of these events would be addressed and so that these communities might be made safer as a result.

This short paper presents only the core point made in each of the papers presented over the course of the two day meeting. More detail can be found by following each link to our website where you will find copies of the presentations and, in most cases, podcasts of each presentation. No doubt many of these presentations will take the somewhat longer route of being converted into written papers in due course, but our aim was clear – to provide a quick antidote to the kind of lazy and sensationalist thinking that dominated the summer and a road map towards progressive and critical insights on the unrest.

The Unrest16:

1. Since most of what happened during the unrest had clear precedents in the series of urban riots that have occurred in the UK since the 1980s, the 2011 riots are best understood as a **moral panic**, a punitive over-reaction to something now quite commonplace. The main novel features of this particular round of events - the sheer vindictiveness of the state's post-riot response (hunting down the rioters, harsh sentencing, naming juveniles) and the spread of rioting to new areas - are symptomatic of a worsening situation, both in relation to policing and socio-economically, for poor, unemployed, disaffected youth living in deprived areas (Professor Tony Jefferson).
2. The recent urban disturbances can clearly be located within the wider history of post-war UK riots of which they are a part, as well as changing official responses to such events. The events of this summer were not some kind of insurrection with clear goals that can be recognised as such by the state. Rather we saw a much more generalised **expression of rage** that the state was unable to recognise in any other form except as some base form of criminality. Both the riots and the punitive response to them highlight the crisis of a neo-liberal state that has failed to provide for a marginal urban class while seeking to clamp down hard on any form of disturbance that might undermine the legitimacy of the state (John Lea, University of Brighton, and Simon Hallsworth, London Metropolitan University).
3. The riots across England in the summer of 2011 possessed a kind of **political energy**, but it was largely repressed and could not be clearly articulated. The reasons for this are complicated, but the rise of an entrenched individualism and living death of politics and community mesh with the inability of the left to construct a popular ideological account of subjective suffering and marginality in a land of ostentatious wealth. Rather than folding their subjective frustrations into a political project that promises a call to account at some point in the future, the rioters were compelled to stew their anxiety and dissatisfaction internally. As a result, the riots took the form of a blind acting-out of an objectless rage – without clear, longer-term goals. Rather than a progressive political call for equality, fairness

and justice, the riots, and the looting in particular, instead offer a sad endorsement of the ruling ideology by default: grab what you can; look after number one; address the lack that lies at the centre of our personal condition with the palliative care of another shopping expedition (Simon Winlow, University of York).

4. Most analyses of the unrest in August have failed to address the complexities of the issues involved or resort to a crude determinism. These issues include the dialectical relationship between order and legitimacy, **the hypocrisy of the powerful** and the reconfiguration of state power. Thinking about the unrest in these terms, and using Liverpool as a case study, raises some serious theoretical and political questions about the material and ideological direction of the local and national state. Focussing on the complex nuances surrounding the unrest in Liverpool is designed to provide an antidote to the London, metropolitan focus which has become the dominant starting point for the analysis of what transpired (Joe Sim, Liverpool John Moores University).
5. Despite attempts at finding quick answers to the **motivations of the rioters and looters**, there was no one way to explain the complex reasons for their occurrence in particular urban areas. The tendency to suggest that these events arose because of some kind of 'sheer criminality' belies a much more complex range of motivations which only come to light when we begin to actually talk to those who were involved (Daniel Briggs, University of East London).
6. The riots generated significant speculation about the future use of particular techniques of crowd control, including the suggested use of water cannon. Such techniques are notably ineffective but sidestep two broader questions – how can we explain the willingness of the state to use such “**non-lethal weapons**”, rather than addressing the underlying causes of the unrest and does the state itself recognise the significant harms involved in the use of such weapons? It seems very likely that states, which now have access to new generations of sub-lethal weaponry, will increasingly deploy these techniques as part of a broader politics of crisis management (Steve Wright, Leeds Metropolitan University).
7. The riots generated the feeling of a state of exception – a condition in which ordinary rules of conduct, law and the control of order are capable of being suspended in the name of pursuing the roots of an immediate **state of emergency**, or crisis. This is a powerful way of helping to explain why the most immediate response of the political and media establishment was not to understand the roots of these events but, rather, to propose a raft of measures aimed at punishing those involved and coming down harder on any possible disturbances in the future. More specifically we can understand this as a kind of class revenge by elites (representing the needs of capital rather than excluded constituencies) seeking the expansion of modes of control through the criminal justice system (harsher sentencing) and future techniques of riot control and policing. Yet the result of these prognoses will more likely to generate further unrest and will not address the roots of the events themselves or the needs for human safety in many of the localities affected (Rowland Atkinson, Simon Parker and Oliver Smith, University of York).
8. **Police attitudes** were instrumental to the original instigation of violence in this and all urban disturbances of the last thirty years. Interviews with young, black men in these neighbourhoods highlight the continued vilification, mistreatment, harassment and occasional terrorisation of this group. This has generated significant resentment and feelings

of disempowerment so that the riots, at least in part, created a space to counter such feelings (Suzella Palmer, University of Bedfordshire).

9. August's social unrest must be understood in the context of dominant **economic thinking** in the UK which is responding to the current financial and economic crisis by forcing the slowing down of domestic demand and insisting on a fundamental restructuring of public services with deep cuts to spending and a rapid privatisation of formerly public provisions. The resulting upheaval in labour markets, public services and attacks on welfare and legislative frameworks which have provided crucial safety nets in the past are all increasing levels of precariousness, insecurity and exclusion for greater numbers of people. Reactions to these measures have, not unsurprisingly, been varied and contradictory - with anger, fear and frustration targeted downwards as well as up and it is important that critical thinkers maintain a clear and focused account of recent events which holds up to scrutiny the actions and decisions of those creating and maintaining conditions which have profoundly destabilising effects for current livelihoods and future ways of living (Karen Evans, University of Liverpool).
10. Work in several London highlights inequalities how front-line staff and parents see immediate risks generated by extensive exposure to low level criminality and anti-social behaviour, particularly since children perceive that well-paid, legitimate work and careers are essentially out of reach. In this sense, child poverty contains an element of '**riot training**', insofar as rioting is perceived as criminality and anti-social behaviour linked to a sense of social and economic marginalisation or disconnect from societal norms. However, these risks can easily be prevented through diversionary activities for children and young people and sustained efforts to improve job prospects in communities (Nicholas Pleace, University of York).
11. An understanding of the riot that occurred in Pendleton, Salford on Tuesday the 9th of October must be situated in the context of extremely high levels of deprivation and increasing unemployment stemming from the 2008 recession. But it must also be seen in the light of **regeneration policies** that have led to a marked polarisation between different social classes in the Central Salford area. Moreover, the events of the riot and the policing of that event have to be understood in relation to policing priorities that have supported these political economic developments and have intensified feelings of resentment on the part of a residualised and increasingly marginalised inner-city working class (Robert Jeffery and Will Jackson, University of Salford).
12. Condemnatory commentary following the August riots emphasised cultural tensions and warned of the immanent assimilation of British heritage by an intruding foreign element. The nature of this response highlights ongoing, historical parallels between two eras of unrest: the 1960s and the present (Steven Hirschler, University of York).
13. In cities like Berlin and Hamburg the role of riots has moved from being a display of anger and political action to an **annual carnival** that appears to be increasingly orchestrated and takes place with clear roles for the police the 'rioters' and many spectators who come along to watch these events. What we see here appears to be a new group of middle-class youth who are thrill-seeking youth via the spectacle of these annual events in gentrified German inner city neighbourhoods. This suggests that the emotional experience generated by this kind of rioting can be connected more broadly to the kind of demands and values found in our consumer culture more broadly (Laura Naegler, University of Hamburg).

14. The riots were not started by gangs but by those with a **gang mentality** and whose anguish is drawn from a complete moral breakdown, broken families, as well as those who just wanted to have fun. Yet it was also initially a reaction to the murder of a black youth in Tottenham, which was the trigger that this generation of youth needed to vent their anger and frustration, not only at society but at their own communities and missing fathers. This generation, seeking love, leadership and opportunities see only a political establishment that continues to ignore its needs – with scant opportunities for apprenticeships and jobs. This generation are not only traumatised by witnessing significant sexual and physical violence, there is also the effect of such behaviours becoming normalised and generating norms for behaviour – including gang rape as initiation, firebombing the mother’s houses of rival gang members and recruiting young people from primary schools. These ‘family’ of the gang becomes a substitute for damaged home lives and few opportunities – this has left a generation of gang members who are angry, full of hate and fear, depressed and who offer no love to those around them. They are violent, have poor communication skills and don’t care if they live or die (Sheldon Thomas, T.A.G).
15. We need to investigate how it was possible for so many to encourage or endorse the unrest through **social media** such as Facebook and Twitter, and what this tells us about the strength of our moral inhibitions when acting online (David Hill, University of York).
16. **Mindful violence - The role of the Urban Street Gang in the riots in London** The post-Tottenham riots were largely generated by existing urban street gangs who acted as crucibles of activity using pre-established networks and organisation to precipitate and expedite involvement facilitated through BBM. As determined by the social field of the gang, the looting and criminal activity was, essentially purposeful and mindful – not mindless (Simon Harding, Middlesex University).

For all podcasts and powerpoint presentations please go to the Media Files section of the Unrest conference website at: <http://www.york.ac.uk/sociology/research/curb/events/2011/urban-unrest/>

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