The 2011 'Riots': Reflections on the Fall and Rise of Community

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Sociological Research Online, 17 (2) 15
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/17/2/15.html>>
10.5153/sro.2648

Received: 1 Feb 2012 Accepted: 23 Mar 2012 Published: 31 May 2012

Abstract

This paper argues that sociological engagement with the 2011 summer unrest in England has thus far overlooked an important aspect of the 'rioting': the troubling by 'rioters' of the communitarian publics and moral geographies which constitute marginalised city-space. In response to this knowledge gap, this paper seeks to argue that the unrest was transgressive of governance logics which construct inner city 'communities' as spatialised units housing ethno-class legacies and sociations; environments in which remoralised urban citizenships are increasingly being located by policymakers and urban managers. A key goal of the paper is to briefly unpack and situate these projects within repertoires of urban management within the neoliberal city. Another goal is to reflect on media and policy responses to the 'riots' to illustrate the existence and reinforcement of these projects, evinced by the popular construction of 'rioting' as contravening ordered community practice. By mapping the representation and vectoring of community within these narratives either as a fallen or resurgent entity, the paper contends that they provide important insights into the contested socio-moral management strategies increasingly brought to bear on the urban poor. The paper also considers foregrounding such urban strategies as context to be crucial for a sociological framing of the unrest and the repudiation of depoliticised victim-blaming accounts. The paper also briefly reflects on the periodised, networked and disparate practices of the 'riots' to stress the dangers of boxing unrest, or indeed rest, within narrow spatial or behavioural boundaries or essentialised causal categories. Amongst other things, the diffuseness and multi-scalar nature of the 'riots' revealed the deficiency of this normative reading of the registers of urban citizenship. In this sense, the paper suggests that some academic commentary on the 'riots' has been in danger of reinforcing the same localised and residualised cartographies of citizenship generated by communitarian governance strategies at a time when sociologists should be exposing and resisting such articulations. In developing this discussion therefore, the paper seeks to challenge the formulations and boundaries of 'community' as conceptualised by urban governance strategies driving the functional reproduction of neoliberal marginalities.

Keywords: *Riots, Community, Governance, Citizenship, Marginality, Neoliberalism*

Introduction

1.1 Sociological commentary provided in *Socresonline* and beyond on the 2011 summer 'riots' in some districts of some English cities has offered respite from predictable mainstream discourses. Anxious media and policy responses sought refuge in familiar patterns of moral panic, condemnation and revanchist penology. However, the entropy and despair that ensued from some quarters was instructive. An important discourse to emerge was that we were told that the 2011 unrest was exceptional, for these, we were told, were not like any other series of 'riots'. Whereas the modern touchstones of Brixton and Bridgewater Farm, of which 2011 was an initial echo (Murji & Neal 2011), were represented as noble 'riots' i.e. a defence of place and resistance to inequality and racism, the 2011 'riots' were nihilistic 'anti-riots' (Millington 2011) which began as a dignified (if still criminalised) protest at police brutality, but which suffered an alarming 72 hour fall from grace, degenerating into a spectacle which even the liberal media initially struggled to explain or excuse (*inter alia* The Guardian 10 Aug 2011). This narrative presented sociologists with opportunities to not only emphasise the structural continuities of UK urban disorder (i.e. as typical and unexceptional) but to highlight the pernicious hierarchical categorisation of unrest which had come to infuse popular readings of 2011. These events were contrasted with and criminalised *in relation to* other important moments of urban protest, thereby linguistically isolating the riots not only as

the actions of a 'feral underclass' (see Grover 2011), but external to ethnicised discourses of exclusion and struggle which have often underpinned the construction of urban crises in the UK. However, a gap in sociological analyses has been substantive engagement with this exclusion and purported exceptionalism. That is, why were these 'riots' particularly worthy of popular anxiety and condemnation? Could it have been *because* of their attack on place, on community and on ethnic and class solidarities? If so, why did this matter to commentators and politicians? Was it purely down to the 'feral' violence or perhaps because the 'riots' revealed deeper fears about apparent weaknesses in UK social, penal and political governance which policy elites struggled to explain and manage (see Dunleavy 2011).

1.2 In this paper, I don't downplay these aspects, but want to argue that through an engagement with the evident anxiety, it is indeed possible to also reflect upon narratives of community in crisis which expose processes and assumptions of moral space making within the inner city. Without essentialising the 'riots' and 'rioters', this approach allows us to begin to challenge some of the normative moral agendas being deployed to actively responsibilise the inner city as part of wider processes of urban restructuring. These agendas connect ethnicised and classicised legacies of marginalised urban enclaves with trajectories and narratives of stability and rejuvenation to constitute urban citizenships positioned around vectors of place, heritage and community (Marquez and Perez 2008). It was these constructed subjectivities and cultures which were imperilled and troubled by the 'rioters' and for this paper, it was these which partly explain the particular forms of demonization and stigmatisation that the 2011 'riots' elicited. The urban poor were thought to have accepted and perhaps been empowered to own their structural, cultural and psychological marginalisation, but summer 2011 proved the inner city remains beyond such simplistic governance imaginaries. Media and policy responses provided a useful depiction of this conflict.

Generating community, moralising the inner city

2.1 We know that community is an ambiguous concept (Levitas 2000) often exploited to promote and disaggregate particularist attributes of a social group (Day 2006) or to collapse social categories within de-politicised, governable terrain (Worley 2005). Nonetheless, we also know that the social power of community (however defined) can be and is an important resource for individuals and groups seeking to secure rights and defend identities and interests, particularly within pressured urban environments (Hoggett 1997). However, community has also come to be utilised as a framework for the socio-moral regeneration of the poor (Wallace 2010) and the governance of citizenship (Rose 2000). That is, there has never been more pressure on 'communities' within urban settings to form and *be*. For example, as pressures from neo-liberal restructuring of cities and states have intensified we have seen policies designed to both upgrade – regenerate – the inner city, activate the workless and bring forth strong self-governing neighbourhoods. These are processes designed to stabilise, (re)moralise and exploit depressed urban regions. Such experiments within urban environments have increased since the late 1990s in the Global North as governments seek to manage 'social exclusion' and have taken a number of forms (see Eick 2011). One of these involves processes of social ordering and enclosure underwritten by a communitarian politics of membership tied to reconfigurations of marginal neighbourhoods as 'liveable,' 'sustainable' and 'responsible' (Wallace forthcoming). In order to contextualise this position, it is important to briefly situate it within contingent processes of urban marginalisation identified by sociologists and urban researchers. Firstly, Loic Wacquant (2010) has posited a compelling thesis regarding the shift in lower class African American urban experience from ghettoised encasement to hyperghettoisation and hyperincarceration. That is, he asserts that the traditional modality of the 'ghetto' has collapsed and been replaced by another institutional formation – prison. This, he argues is a specific form of penal 'roll out' reserved – in the main – for poor, young, male ghetto dwellers who are moved seamlessly between the two formations. This cyclical analysis of class containment and punishment lacks attention to processes of moral regeneration for this paper, but in terms of the 'riots', we can see echoes of Wacquant's thesis if we consider the number of relatively poor 2011 'rioters' who had already been churned by the criminal justice system. This enabled politicians to define the 'rioters' as 'criminal' actors – 'the usual suspects' – engendering a convenient elision of criminality, penalty and marginality raising questions about the structural forces brought to bear on those transgressing codes of community.

2.2 Secondly, we have gentrification as a process imprinted on capital accumulation strategies designed to displace the poor and enhance the market value of the city (Brenner & Theodore 2002). According to proponents of this perspective, the spaces of the poor are increasingly exploited as resources for, and vanishing points in, processes of globalised capital circulation and accumulation. 'Urban restructuring' is highlighted as contributing to the growing spatial indeterminacy of marginal populations and in many cases the outright erasure of spatial attachments, thereby undermining access to social and political resources. Thirdly, we have the 'revanchist' city thesis (Smith 1996) which underpins the 'rolling out' of neoliberal governing repertoires which discipline, displace or expel troublesome populations from the practices of the 'civilised' city. Again, the poor are constructed as inimical to productive city-space and banished to stigmatised districts.

2.3 However, with these accounts of the enclosures of the urban poor as background to the terrain of the 'riots', I want to suggest we should include additional space for analysis of a flexibilised urban management which is opening up new constellations of poor neighbourhoods as 'communities' through which responsible citizenship can be generated. In other words, the inner city is, in some cases, no longer solely defined by its discursive and material exclusion, but as performative of new urban governance practices and bound into the re-assembling of relations between nation states, internal territories and populations (Stenson, 2008). Empowered 'communities' have been redefined as responsible actors within civic, social and economic spheres and are often strategic resources both economically and socially, underpinned by discourses of responsibility, agency and imprinted with signifiers of ethno-class heritage (Wallace 2010). Once, they could be considered simply as socioeconomic 'trenches' created and exposed by neo-liberal 'roll back' (Wacquant, 2008). Now, these 'trenches' are more likely to be operationalised as sites of order, participation and renewal, drawn into

'new governance spaces', implicated in the regeneration of the urban and bound to logics of civic security. They continue to be subjects of a policy gaze, but one that repositions them as actors and participants in facilitating neighbourhood 'sustainability' and 'wellbeing' thereby supporting 'place marketing' (Harvey, 1989) and compensating for (uneven) forms of state retrenchment. Rather than just being contained, expelled or gentrified, they are also being engaged and 'communitised' as possessive of responsibility.

2.4 What I am outlining here is a transformation in conceptions of the inner city as the needs of the city and nation state are restructured and relations between citizen, state and territory are reorganised. This should not be read as neglecting or obscuring the continuing marginality and subjugation experienced by many urban spaces and populations. We know that traditions of excluding and containing the urban poor continue to involve visible and tangible policies of displacement and relocation to outer estates or 'Banlieues'. Further, these are non-linear processes and local populations experience complex terrains of marginality that generate opportunities to resist, challenge or subvert new governance arrangements (see Wallace, 2010). Furthermore, we know that the reality of being absorbed into networks of what we might call self-governance can be freighted with concerns about asymmetrical power structures, disillusionment with a lack of empowerment (Taylor, 2007) and a suspicion that 'active' communities are in fact legitimising state retrenchment (Wallace, 2010). Nonetheless, what is suggested here is that inner city terrain is increasingly subject to new frames of reference and is being 'remade' accordingly. This means we need a more nuanced understanding of the conflicting pressures impinging on the urban poor. An important continuity in this discussion of how poor neighbourhoods have been (re)assembled is the instability that underpins the emergence of such 'communities.' Just as the residualised 'slum' is 'structurally unstable' (Wacquant, 2009: 170) and not wholly controllable, manageable and without agency, so it is with the new community publics which are legacies and sediments of public and economic policies which simultaneously open up and close down opportunities to pursue locally defined neighbourhood futures. This takes us back to the contested politics of urban restructuring and – despite the communitarian turn – the precariousness of place as a locus of moralising community projects. The 2011 'riots' were not a direct repudiation of this responsabilising governance framework, but an unsettling and a contesting of the logics by which spaces of the urban poor are being increasingly constituted and it was this logic – that inner city communities should be stable spaces in which disorder and incivility is locally managed and welfare is locally produced – that media and political actors sought recourse to in their framing of the riots.

Fall and rise of community

3.1 Beyond the undoubted moral panicking about feral youth and dysfunctional cities (Scrambler and Scrambler 2011), responses to the riots were dominated by stories of community. Interpretations and constructions of this notoriously promiscuous concept (see Day 2006) were central to framing and problematising the 2011 'riots' and critical to their characterisation as different to previous periods of unrest whether in 1981 Toxteth or 2001 Oldham. What was initially represented – positively by some liberal commentators – as something of an ethnicised defence of space and place in Tottenham was soon lamented – as the unrest dispersed and circulated London – as mindless acts of self-harm by rioters against their own class, territory and local lifeworlds. Nihilistic young people were not rejecting sources of cultural or socioeconomic harm, but for the most part they were trashing their own cities and neighbourhoods, destroying family owned businesses, terrifying older residents. We seemed shocked to learn that local community meant so little to the rioters. It was inimical to a recklessness governed only by brutality, greed and the virtual, mysterious rhythms of the BlackBerry. We were told there was no sense of or respect for place. Of course, for some conservative onlookers this was not a surprise – this was an 'intifada of the underclass' – an all too predictable outpouring from the feckless and feral (see Kruger 2011).

3.2 Then we had the redemption. Saviours of community were exemplified by the now infamous footage of Turkish shopkeepers in Dalston, Sikhs defending a temple in Southall, the clear up 'wombles' in Clapham and elsewhere, as well as Mrs Pauline Pearce the straight-talking 'Hackney Heroine' chastising young people for 'running down Footlocker' rather than fighting for a cause. Mrs Pearce was subsequently deified by the media for her critique of the violence and was invited to speak at the Conservative Party's annual conference. We began to see the rioters positioned in opposition to these dignified, 'respectable' voices that were held up as at least *some* evidence of civilisation in the disordered inner city. Community *did* – it turned out – exist and some were grateful to see that it had a sense of place, of ethnic pride, of identity and of right and wrong. Nonetheless, the damage had been done. A key discourse in explaining the riots had emerged to assert that young people had turned *against* or lost a sense of community necessitating a re-assertion of ethno-class pride and purpose. There were of course some exceptions such as Darcus Howe – veteran of Brixton 1981 – willing to point out, despite noxious questioning (see 2011) that these were 'our' young people who might have a 'cause' after all.

3.3 Zygmunt Bauman described the unrest as mutinies by 'disaffected and disqualified consumers' (Bauman 2011) who were transgressing the avenues and practices of controlled consumption. I think we can adapt Bauman's analysis to describe the disorder as acts of violence that transgressed the boundaries and established practices of community *as constructed for* the inner city. As noted above, these are boundaries and practices that are being ever more tightly defined through the creation of responsabilised socio-spatial publics. In their transgression, 'rioters' toyed with normative frames of community, order and civility. They played on social divisions. They sought to be the centre, defender, destroyer, to be in control of community. They briefly contested what it means to be a member of the urban poor before being ultimately relegated back to the margins and punished accordingly. This was a transgressive negation of urban citizenship that challenged a communitarian publicness based on responsibility, spatiality, hierarchy and fixity of place. Far from class being 'invisible' (Scrambler and Scrambler 2011), reaction to the 'riots' demonstrated the existence of bounded cartographies of

citizenship for the urban poor, the momentary explicit rejection of which and the castigation and punishment resulting from such behaviour. Ironically, the much-remarked upon virtual connectedness of the 'rioters' and copycat aspects attested to spontaneous examples of bridging and bonding social capital with networks that transcended place and evaporated as soon as they were formed, whilst blurring the boundaries between 'rioters' and the crowds of 'onlookers' following in the streets, on Twitter and on newspaper live blogs all wondering where a mob might strike next.

3.4 This is not necessarily an argument about causation – the diffuse nature of the unrest might not have been directly caused by a sense of restriction or oppression. Further, we know that many people inhabit and will defend such subjectivities and do not seek to challenge them. Therefore, the 'riots' were merely an illustration of the troubling and unsettling of the geographies and practices of community governance and moral space-making. That is, the 'remaking' of community (Wallace 2010) which is tied to a constellation of governance strategies and urban publics that more sharply define and punish 'antisocial' transgressive conduct. The 'riots' provided us with insights into community as a contested terroir in the ongoing struggles over the meaning and ownership of the urban inner city. The outrage over the 'riots' and the relief at the prevailing communitarianism with its self-help and self-policing is a telling narrative about the moral (as well as penal and economic) power which is brought to bear on the urban poor. This is what the 'rioters' succeeded in momentarily challenging, subverting and caricaturing although in the end it was those same spatialised moral frameworks which underpinned revanchist policy responses.

Conclusion

4.1 Policies of urban management within the inner city were a key backdrop to the 2011 'riots'. In summary, the young 'rioters' were constructed as 'feral' in part because they momentarily disrupted the norms and expectations of inner-city community, norms and expectations which have become increasingly bound up with the reproduction and management of urban marginality under conditions of neo-liberalism. The key focus of this paper has been to highlight the fragility of building and sustaining moralised, place-based communities within disadvantaged districts of the city in light of the violence and disorder unleashed by young 'rioters'. A key argument has been that the deification of 'respectable' community actors and the criminalising of 'deviant' responses to community reflected and reinforced the ethnicised and classicised repertoires of urban marginality which poor urban citizens are expected to valorise, but which some (mainly young citizens) succeeded in contesting. In this paper, I have attempted to understand this dynamic through the illustration of the 'fall' and 'rise' of community to demonstrate the continued anxiety that the dysfunctional inner city can provoke. These narratives reflect and intersect with projects of governance concerned with remaking marginal city districts as responsible publics predicated on vectors of place, community and civility.

4.2 Moral space-making within the inner city is an important facet of the 2011 unrest which deserves further investigation by sociologists. In particular, there are opportunities for further empirical and theoretical work which explores policies of place-making, social ordering and community building which increasingly constitute and frame the possibilities and boundaries of neighbourhoods. Furthermore, there is work to be done in understanding how citizens who inhabit these unstable city-spaces, experience, constitute and challenge these scales and registers. Currently, young people in particular are held to account according to topographies of place and ethics which are being constantly eroded and re-calibrated according to socioeconomic vagaries. An important final point worth reiterating is to reflect on the periodised and disparate practices of the 'riots' and reject attempts at defining them as hemmed by narrow spatial or behavioural boundaries. The spatialising and communitising of the unrest was constructed by critical voices keen to constitute 'rioting' as amoral and anti-social and lacking social and ethical rootedness. In contrast, this paper suggests that 'rioters' did not lack a sense of place; they just occupied a plurality of 'communities' (Delanty 2003): spaces and registers of urban citizenship not reducible to localised and residualised cartographies of citizenship. As sociologists we would do well to avoid constructing our analysis within these similarly narrow parameters and take account of the multi-scalar, layered topologies of the urban in which citizens are engaged. What did the footage of groups 'running down' American sportswear chain Footlocker, present on the high streets of Hackney and Brixton, depict if not precise evidence of a rejection of the 'folding together of the distant and the proximate' (Amin 2007: 103), not to mention the ironies of castigating citizens for their lack of attachment to place and heritage. There is much work to be done in exposing these fraught contexts of urban experience in which destructive and transgressive practices are constituted as external to acceptable scripts of everyday urban practice.

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