Reflections on a Week of Riotous Events: Practising 'Political Listening' and Youth 'Public Sociology'

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Introduction: A riotous week

1.1 At the end of September 2012 my week began with a trip to the theatre to see a production of *The Girls*, a play about the lives of four young people, set in South East London on the eve of the English Riots of 2011. My week ended at London South Bank University at the conference Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The Riots One Year On. In rooms packed full of political anger (Rogers 2013) and intellectual energy, the conference delivered what its organisers had promised, a space to critically reflect on the English riots of 2011 and to interrogate the relationship between the riots and the increasingly hostile conditions of neo-liberalism that are being reshaped in this post-crash era of 'austerity'. The following week, inspired by the conference and a conversation with Teddy Nygh, director of the film documentary *Riot from Wrong*, I attended a screening of the documentary at a community centre in Tottenham, the area of North London where the July riots began. The screening was followed by a Question and Answer session and lively debate between audience members, Teddy Nygh and the young people involved in making the documentary.

1.2 In this short 'think-piece' I reflect on my experiences of attending these three events as a way of engaging with some of the debates raised at the conference; namely, about how narratives of young lives and historical events get written and how researchers, publics and politicians can engage with young people to produce alternative narratives to the pathologised accounts presented by politicians and media commentators in the aftermath of the English riots.

1.3 The demonisation of young people in media and policy discourses has a long history that has been well documented in the research literature (for example, Cohen 1972; Pearson 1983; see also Jones 2009 and France 2007 for an overview of this work). Young lives are frequently held up as a kind of 'social barometer' of wider social changes (Jones & Wallace 1992) and imagined in terms of a threat or danger to society and as evidence of its moral degeneration (Cohen 1972; Hall & Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). Speaking at the riots conference, Sociologist Les Back characterised much of the public debate about the riots as a 'text book moral panic' and 'a festival of stupidity', with British MP Theresa May and Historian David Starkey held up as two clear examples (out of many) of 'ignorance articulated with total confidence' (Back 2012). As Back cautioned however, it is too easy to poke fun at this ignorance. We need instead to think *critically* and *sociologically* about what was going on at the riots and to focus, using Bauman's analogy, on the minefield and not the explosion (Bauman 2012).

Public sociology and political listening

A particular kind of listening can serve to break up linguistic conventions and create a public realm where a plurality of voices, faces, and languages can be heard and seen and spoken (Bickford 1996: 129).

2.1 The organisers of the riots conference invited us to consider the conference as a space to practice 'public sociology' and to ask questions, as Yvette Taylor did in her opening address, about what this practice might mean: How can we go about doing 'public sociology' in a way that doesn't reduce lives and events to data? What kinds of spaces for reflection can we create in academia and within what kinds of timeframes, with consideration of the 'pace' at which academia moves? And further, how can we make sociology 'travel' beyond the academy? (Taylor 2012).

2.2 In his presidential address to the American Sociological Association Michael Burawoy argued that the concept of 'public sociology' needed to be reinvigorated in response to the deepening inequalities and increasingly pervasive neoliberal policies in the US that he argues are 'hostile to the very idea of "society"' (Burawoy 2004: 263). In the UK sociologists have critically engaged with Burawoy's concept of 'public

sociology' (i.e. Holmwood 2007) exploring ways of engaging, as Burawoy suggested, with 'multiple publics in multiple ways' (Burawoy 2004: 259). In the current UK context of increasingly hostile neoliberal 'austerity', debates about the public role of sociologists have acquired renewed vigour and urgency – as documented by much of the debate emerging from the riots conference.

2.3 Speaking at the conference, Leah Bassel offered her own concept of how this kind of 'dialogic relation between sociologist and public' (Burawoy 2004: 267) might take place (Bassel 2012a; see also Bassel 2013). Drawing on the work of Les Back (2007) and Susan Bickford (1996) Bassel argued that we need to create opportunities for 'political listening' in order to intervene in – and disrupt – the ways in which the legacy of the riots gets written into the social imagination, and to facilitate greater understanding between the media and other institutions and community groups.

2.4 Bassel provided the example of a public symposium that she helped organise in Birmingham in 2011 as an act of 'political listening' that brought together young people and community members living in riot-affected areas with various members of the media. This event formed the basis for a report entitled, *Media and The Riots: A Call to Action* that examines the relationship between the media and riots affected communities and that makes recommendations for future media reporting (Bassel 2012b). The report documents reactions to the media coverage of the riots and the ways in which it was stigmatizing and insensitive, providing incorrect information and a voice of moral condemnation that 'was not colour blind' (Bassel 2012b, 2013).

2.5 Speaking at the riots conference, Bassel cautioned that we would not walk away from her talk 'starry eyed' and raised questions about what kinds of interventions we can expect from sociologists and from journalists in this harsh adversarial media climate (Bassel 2012a, 2013). As Bassel's report demonstrates, there is often little public space for complexity in media reporting given the public appetite for the 'us versus them' media approach (Bassel 2013). Bassel's talk provided a useful example however of how sociologists can facilitate critical public conversations that travel across institutional, professional and generational boundaries, breaking down some of the 'tight boundaries' that frame what it is possible to say and to hear from within our different institutional and social positions (Bassel 2012a).

2.6 This think-piece is a response to the invitation from conference organisers to question what it means to do 'public sociology' and to use my reflections on the three events detailed below to consider the kinds of accounts of the riots and of young lives that can be generated through creating different kinds of forums for 'political listening' (Bickford 1996; Bassel 2012a).

Event one: the conference – rewriting the riots

3.1 The conference offered a powerful critique of the suggestion by politicians and other public commentators that the riots were evidence of a 'feral underclass' (Clarke 2011) and a 'broken society' (Cameron 2011). There was a strong sense of anger emanating from the conference panellists, speakers and audience members about these simplistic and ideological representations and the way that particular social groups of people living in Britain – young people, white people, black people, working class people, single and working class parents for example – have been constructed and demonised by politicians and by journalists.

3.2 Pathologising the riots, as conference panellist Clifford Stott pointed, is a powerful ideological discourse because it produces a particular solution; force, curfew and rubber bullets (Stott 2012). As speakers documented throughout the day, this kind of 'law and order' approach is a 'solution' that criminalises young people and closes down critical spaces for understanding the causes of the riots and for considering alternative state responses such as the provision of support for unemployed young people or funding for police–community engagement initiatives (Silvestri 2013). To find these kinds of 'solutions', Stott suggested, we need to first look at the riots not as mindless or meaningless, but as telling us something fundamental about the relationships in society.

3.3 The conference provided the opportunity to pause and look critically at these social relationships and to interrogate the 'minefield' of deepening inequalities and strained police community relations from which, speakers argued, the riots exploded. This was achieved through emphasising the importance of particular local historical narratives of racial inequality and deaths in police custody (in Tottenham for example) and through highlighting the importance of telling, as panellist Lisa McKenzie suggested, 'real people's stories' (McKenzie 2012, 2013). In particular, McKenzie argued, we need to listen to the stories of those stigmatised as 'riotous subjects', such as the working class mothers of the young people caught up in the rioting and looting in their communities. Through listening to these stories, as McKenzie's talk powerfully demonstrated, we can gain insight into the everyday experiences of living with poverty and stigmatisation in the poor communities and estates where much of the rioting took place.

3.4 The conference provided a space for listening, looking back and reflecting on the riots (Cooper 2013) but also for starting to look to the future and to ask how those of us present can politicise the communities that we live in and make sure that the anger, critical imagination and 'political listening' of the day travels beyond the conference rooms. Throughout the day discussion returned to the question of what we should do about the minefield conditions that, speakers argued, are being exacerbated by the coalition government's welfare and education policies and public spending cuts. In response to this question, Tracey Gore, Director of the Steve Biko Housing Association in Liverpool emphasised the importance of having 'hope' in these increasingly hostile conditions and provided details of an initiative in Liverpool in which detached youth workers meet regularly with the police and have set up ways for young people to document their experiences of being stopped and searched. Journalist and author Owen Jones's response emphasised the importance of making media institutions more representative of British society, whilst Valerie Hey highlighted the importance of rebuilding alliances and dialogue between the

'haves' and the 'have-nots' as a direct challenge to the idea that any kind of successful society is possible without this.

Event two: *The Girls* – performing real people's stories

4.1 Youth researchers such as Rob MacDonald and Jane Marsh (2001, 2005) have shown the ways in which biographical life history methods can be used in social research to generate understandings of socially excluded young people's lives. Using biographical cameos the researchers show how accounts of personal experience can offer insight into the wider social inequalities and how they are lived and inhabited by young people. The theatrical production of the stage play *The Girls* puts this biographical method – as well as Lisa McKenzie's call to listen to 'real people's stories' – powerfully to work, using the accounts of four young people's lives to bring gendered and racialised stories of violence, poverty and social exclusion to public theatre audiences.

4.2 *The Girls* is a play that opens with four young people arriving for a compulsory counselling session in South East London on the eve of the London riots in 2011. While these four people sit and wait for the group leader who never arrives, London starts rioting and the young people start to create their own therapy session. The drama moves between their group 'banter', hostile interactions and news of the rioting creeping in via their mobile phones and a series of monologues and sketches that tell their often brutal life stories. The play was written by writer/director Ray Harrison Graham who developed the script from a series of improvisation workshops over the summer of 2011 working with a group of young people who had attended Pupil Referral Units, having been permanently excluded from mainstream schools. The four young actors who perform in the play tell their own stories of violence, anger, poverty and abuse.

4.3 The play opens with a now notorious clip from BBC newsnight showing David Starkey claiming that 'the whites have turned black' and that it is this appeal of 'black' culture that was at the root of the July riots and subsequent social disorder. The play also included a scene in which the group of young people bitingly unpick the contradictions of what it means to act, dress, and embody 'black'. In this way the play foregrounds issues of racial inequality and how this plays out in young people relationships with partners, peers and the all white professionals who populate the play. The title of the play however points towards the gendered social positions that these four young people inhabit. Whilst all four young people tell their stories of anger, poverty and educational exclusion, for the 'girls' this unfolds in stories of trying to avoid and/or becoming mothers and victims of domestic violence and sexual exploitation. For the 'boy' in the play however, the drama revolves around his efforts to escape the police, his girl-friend, his fellow gang members and his own potential for violence, which ultimately leads to his imprisonment for assaulting the mother of his child.

4.4 The play ends with a report that one of the girls has shot and killed the practitioner we have just seen trying, ineffectively, to offer support. In this bleak dramatisation of the emotional relationships between young people and welfare institutions (Froggett 2002), the play pulled apart any notion that professional interactions and counselling sessions alone could change the lives of these young people. As Val Gillies reflected at the riots conference in relation to her own research with young people in PRUs, anger management sessions are not going to solve the problems that young people face, but we do need to interrogate how we work with angry young people and find ways that we can validate their anger whilst also helping them to manage their emotional experiences in ways that are less damaging. As Gillies and others at the conference reflected, these kinds of individualised interventions that aim to 'fix' 'troubled' young people run the risk of creating individualised pathologies, rather than attending to the broader social, economic and political contexts within which these interventions take place.

4.5 As a youth practitioner currently working in the field of youth domestic violence, I think I am pretty hardened to harrowing tales of young people's sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect, hunger, loss and pain, but the raw emotion and the hopelessness of this play still hit me hard. There were no resolutions; these were stories of getting, and feeling, stuck in cycles of violence and poverty, and the playwright and young actors refused to indulge us with stories of redemption and bright new futures.

4.6 It is in interviews recorded for the BBC worldservice that the young actors offer a glimmer of the hope that the play refuses to provide: the possibility of a future, a transition, a becoming. As one of the actors, Princess Webb, describes;

People really have a perception of us cos we are children from the PRU and when we go off stage and they are *still* clapping and its like, people actually like us and we are like, really? Like we have potential? We could actually *be* something that someone admires, that people actually want to see? It's hard to believe. I still can't believe it now actually (in Hadjimatheou 2012).

4.7 Princess Webb suggests that the production challenges audience perceptions of 'children from the PRU' and further that the audience applause challenges her perception of herself as a child without 'potential.' Her comments suggest that projects such as *The Girls* can enable personal transformation for the young people involved, but further that this kind of production can work as a form of 'political listening' that breaks down the 'tight boundaries' around who is listening and speaking to whom. As Gillian Slovo argued when speaking at the riots conference about writing her own play, in the absence of a public enquiry about the riots, theatre can function as an important political tool to spark debates and challenge public miscomprehension about why the riots happened.

Event three: *Riot from Wrong* – political listening and/as political action

5.1 The week after the conference I attended a public screening of the documentary *Riot from Wrong* at a

community centre in Tottenham, the area of North London where Mark Duggan had lived and was shot by police and where local police protests turned into riots, looting and the destruction of local businesses and properties. It is also the area where I had worked for several years as a youth practitioner before I left to start my PhD and before the local authority cut 80% of Youth and Connexions posts^[1].

5.2 *Riot from Wrong* is a documentary made by a group of young people who got together on the day of the riots and decided to make a film that 'look[s] deeper than the actions of those that rioted' and that goes 'right to the heart of the issues affecting society' (<http://riotfromwrong.com/>). The documentary was screened to a full audience and the Q&A session created a space for the local community in Tottenham to reflect and to organise. Taking place in the borough of North London where the riots began, it provided a space to recognise the loss and injustice that Mark Dugan's family and friends (who were present at the screening) were experiencing and to acknowledge the creativity, talent and hard work of the young people who made the documentary. There was passionate and angry debate from the audience about police community relations and the failings of local MP David Lammy to support the local community, as well as enthusiasm about bringing the documentary into schools and into parliament as an educational and political tool.

5.3 The emotional tenor and analyses of the minefield of social relations that led to the riots within the documentary and screening discussion, paralleled those documented at the conference: aggressive police stop and search policies, youth unemployment and cuts to youth services, a media that demonises and alienates young people and local histories of racial tensions, poverty and inequality (Bassel 2013). At both events questions were raised about what to do about this; how can we support young people through this minefield during a time of public spending cuts and 'austerity' and how can we prevent further incidents of police violence and the death and stigmatisation of young black men like Mark Duggan?

5.4 Sitting in West Green Learning centre in Tottenham I felt a familiar bubble of anxiety and discomfort that my PhD research and academic work might not have anything to do with the 'real world': with the injustice, pain and violence that was documented in the film and enacted so powerfully in *The Girls*. I felt envious of the direct forms of young engagement and political action being showcased and galvanised, and nostalgic for a time when I worked full-time with young people in less mediated and abstract ways.

Conclusion: Reflections on a riotous week

6.1 Reflecting afterwards on the three events that I had attended, I realised that the real world/academy divide that bubbles anxiously through my own personal biography is not only unhelpful for interrogating and intervening in the socio-political minefield that shapes young people's lives, it also fails to provide an accurate account of the three events and the spaces that they created. Tracing instead the connections between divergent publics and the movement of actors across the 'boundaries' of academia, the arts, journalism and local activism creates a different account of my riotous week.

6.2 I had attended a play at a community theatre in South East London that arose out of a nearby arts project at a PRU and that is linked to a research project at the University of Sussex. I had also attended a conference hosted by a university that included input primarily from academics but also from journalists, writers, community leaders and activists. Lastly I attended a public screening of a documentary made by a youth focussed community production house, attended by local residents and activists, the friends and family of Mark Duggan, academics, journalists, young people, youth workers and many unidentified others who were, like me, silent participants at the event.

6.3 As I reflect on these three events I recognise my privilege in being able to participate in all three spaces and to experience the ways in which these three different 'public realms' were able to foreground different aspects of youth experience and enable different kinds of 'voices, faces, and languages [to] be heard and seen and spoken' (Bickford 1996: 129). Listening at times feels frustratingly passive and insufficient when confronting events such as the 2011 riots and the social minefield from which they exploded. Each of these events demonstrated however the importance of creating public spaces for listening carefully and politically to these mediated accounts of young people's lives as a way of sparking critical thought and imagination that travels beyond 'tight' professional and generational boundaries. We may live 'in dark times' as Les Back has suggested, 'but sociology – as listening art – can provide resources to help us live through them, whilst pointing to the possibility of a different kind of future' (Back 2007: 167).

Notes

¹Connexions is a government youth support and guidance service that was set up in 2000 as part of the New Labour government's strategy to reduce social exclusion (DfEE 1999, 2000). Local Connexions and youth services have been subject to significant funding cuts since the coalition government came to power in the UK in May 2010.

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