The Riots of the Underclass?: Stigmatisation, Mediation and the Government of Poverty and Disadvantage in Neoliberal Britain

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Abstract

The riots in England in August 2011 comprised one of the most significant events of civil unrest in recent British history. A consensus rapidly emerged, notably within political commentary, print journalism, television and online news media coverage of these five nights of rioting, that these were the riots of the underclass. This article explores how and why the conceptual and perceptual frame of the underclass – a frame through which child poverty and youth unemployment are conceived as consequences of a cocktail of 'bad individual choices', an absence of moral judgement, poor parenting, hereditary or genetic deficiencies, and/or welfare dependency – was mobilised as a means of explaining and containing the meaning of these riots. It briefly traces the longer cultural and political history of the underclass as an objectifying category and then examines how this framing of the riots was used to generate public consent for the shift from protective liberal forms of welfare to penal neoliberal 'workfare' regimes. In his response to the riots, Paul Gilroy argued that 'one of the worst forms of poverty that's shaped our situation is poverty of the imagination' (Gilroy 2011). Following Gilroy's call for alternative political aesthetics and in order to engender critical sociological perspectives that might contest the downward social mobility and deepening inequalities which neoliberal social and economic policies are affecting, the aim of this article is to fracture the consensus that these were the riots of the underclass. By exposing the underclass as a powerful political myth, it is possible to transform public understandings of poverty and disadvantage and vitalise understandings of neoliberalism as class struggle.

Introduction

Catastrophe generates the beast it needs (China Miéville 2012: 57)

We have the riots we deserve (Alain Badiou 2006: 114).

1.1 In the globalised world of the twenty-first century, economic polarisation has reached unparalleled depths. In countries like Britain, which have ostensibly been the beneficiaries of the epochal shift from industrial to neoliberal modes of capitalism in the 1970s, neoliberal modes of governmentality have been unleashing caustic inequalities for some time – something Danny Dorling revealed in his startling statement that '[i]n Britain today chances in life [for British citizens] are now more determined by where (and to whom) they were born as compared to any other date in the last 651 years' (Dorling 2007: 5). It is well documented, for example, that economic inequalities are reaching nineteenth-century levels in Britain and further that inequalities are negatively impacting on social mobility and social cohesion (see for example Skeggs 2004; Wilkinson & Pickett 2009; Wacquant 2010). Yet successive post-War British Governments led the citizenry to believe that neoliberalism would effect a new market-driven egalitarianism. At the very moment that economic inequalities within the state were deepening, 'class' was expunged from mainstream political vocabularies. On the one hand what characterises neoliberal Britain is heightened class antagonisms, while on the other the political vocabulary of class struggle was rendered obsolete by the elites. This linguistic turn away from class was epitomised within the rhetoric of the New Labour Government and in particular the premiership of Tony Blair (1997–2007) who, on taking office, announced the dawn of a new meritocratic and 'classless' society (Gillies 2005; Tyler 2013). Blair's rhetorical exhortations formed one part of a much longer three-decade struggle to jettison the language of class struggle as the perceptual framework through which to perceive social and economic (dis)advantage.

1.2 If class has become a *revolting subject*, the abjectification of class politics is itself a form of *class-making* (Skeggs 2004; Tyler 2013). For as David Harvey (2005) argues, neoliberalism *is* a class project:

an ideology that consolidates the power of the elites, under the veil of rhetoric of individualism, choice, freedom, mobility and national security. Indeed, as Zygmunt Bauman suggests, what actually characterises neoliberal states is the creation of ever greater numbers of 'wasted humans' within and at the borders of sovereign territories (Bauman 2004: 5). Yet despite the accumulating evidence of *wasted lives*, the political myth of meritocracy has had startling and deep-seated effects in terms of its impact on public perceptions of poverty, unemployment and disadvantage.

Stigmatisation as a form of governance

2.1 Loïc Wacquant argues that too many sociological accounts of the impact of neoliberal governmental policies concentrate on 'thin economic conceptions of neoliberalism as market rule' (Wacquant 2010: 197). There has been less emphasis on thick sociological accounts of neoliberalism as it unfolds as forms of governance – and in particular there has been insufficient analysis of the mechanisms through which public consent is procured for the policies and practices that are effecting these deepening inequalities within the state. Wacquant's work is exceptional in detailing the three major forms of symbolic and material violence that characterise the new forms of poverty effected by neoliberal social and economic policies: labour precarity, which produces 'material deprivation, family hardship, temporal uncertainty and personal anxiety' (Wacquant 2008: 24–25); the relegation of people to decomposing neighbourhoods in which public and private resources are dwindling; and heightened stigmatisation 'in daily life as well as in public discourse' (Wacquant 2008: 24–25). Through an analysis of the *mediation* of the August 2011 riots in the British public sphere, this article focuses on the third of these characteristics of neoliberal governmentality, *heightened stigmatisation*. It is concerned in particular with how the riots were mediated, imagined and 'made' in public, and the forms of public understanding of youth poverty, unemployment and welfare entitlements through which the stigmatisation of the rioters as 'scum' was reproduced and cemented.^[1] To begin, the article briefly traces the longer cultural and political history of the underclass as an abjectifying category. It then examines how the framing of the riots – as the riots of the underclass – was used to generate and deepen public consent for the shift from protective liberal forms of welfare to penal workfare regimes.

Scum semiotics

3.1 From the outset the news media coverage of the riots unleashed a torrent of 'underclass' appellations. As Matthew Connolly noted in *The Guardian*, 'Scum, thugs, feral rats, wolves, an army of ants on their BlackBerrys ... the dehumanising epithets flew like bricks through a JD Sports window last week' (Connolly 2011). The same stigmatising language which had systematically mocked, humiliated and shamed disenfranchised young people as 'chav scum' for the preceding decade (Skeggs 2005; Tyler 2008; Raisborough & Adams 2008; Jones 2011) reached a crescendo in the immediate and subsequent coverage of the riots. The term 'scum' was the favoured pejorative: 'the scum class', 'verminous waste', 'these scum need to be removed from society permanently by whatever means is necessary', wrote bloggers in a BBC news thread (in Easton 2011).

3.2 The rapid spread and scale of the August 2011 riots led to panicked assertions in the news media that the riots were contagious and uncontrollable, and for a while this is how it felt both to the rioters and to the wider public. Indeed the blanket media coverage, and in particular rolling 24-hour television news footage of looters apparently 'getting away with it' undoubtedly contributed to the spread of the riots (see Bassel 2012: 9; Bassel 2013). From politicians, journalists and the wider public there were immediate calls for harsh and exceptional remedies including shipping water cannon over from Northern Ireland, equipping police with rubber bullets, bringing armed forces onto the streets, the use of unusually punitive detention and prison sentences, the removal of welfare benefits from rioters and their families, and the eviction of families from local authority housing. Many proposed more extreme solutions, such as flogging, conscription, chain gangs, corporal and capital punishment and sterilisation; 'I have no problem with armed police or military units hosing down the rioters with machine guns', commented one blogger. In the midst of the riots, on 8 August 2011, a Conservative Member of the European Parliament, Roger Helmer, sent a message on Twitter to followers: 'MEMO TO COBRA: "Time to get tough. Bring in the Army. Shoot Looters and Arsonists on sight"'. On the same day an article by journalist Mary Riddell was published in *The Telegraph*, titled 'London Riots: The Underclass Lashes Out', in which she described scenes on the streets as 'a Hobbesian dystopia of chaos and brutality' enacted by a 'ruined generation' (Riddell 2012).

3.3 This 'scum semiotics' swelled in the days and weeks after the riots had ended. London Mayor, Boris Johnson was pictured wielding a broom in solidarity with the concerned citizens who came out onto the streets to assist local authorities in the post-riot clear-up and symbolically to 'reclaim' the streets by sweeping them clean. The news media, keen to capitalise on what Sofia Himmelblau (2011) described as 'the thinly veiled symbolism of social cleansing', pictured these 'broom army' recruits wearing T-shirts proclaiming 'looters are scum' (see also Casey 2013; Jensen 2013). It is important to note that this explosion of hate speech was aimed not only at those who had participated in the rioting and criminal activities such as looting, but at their families and the wider communities in which the rioters lived.

3.4 Even before the fires were out and the streets 'cleansed', the rioters and the public were warned that the proffering and receiving of 'economic and sociological justifications' would be as revolting as the riotous acts themselves (Boris Johnson in Milne 2011). As Seumas Milne commented in *The Guardian*, 'When [...] Ken Livingstone [a former Mayor of London] linked the riots to the impact of public spending cuts, it was almost as if he'd torched a building himself' (Milne 2011).

Underclass consensus

4.1 The BBC Home Editor, Mark Easton's first response to the riots on 11 August, 2011, 'England riots:

The return of the underclass' (Easton 2011) was symptomatic of an emerging political consensus that these were *the riots of the underclass*. What I mean by this is: (a) that the riots were proffered as evidence that there is a population who form an underclass within the British State, and (b) that this contentious and stigmatising term was an appropriate and seemingly self-evident classificatory name for the predominantly young people who participated in the riots. Easton's article drew upon a 2008 policy report by Iain Duncan Smith, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, which argued for more early childhood interventions within the 'dysfunctional base' of our society' (Duncan Smith 2008: 11). In this report Duncan Smith contended that there was a 'creeping expansion' of a 'more menacing underclass' which was drawing 'decent' families into the 'code of the street' (Duncan Smith in Easton 2011).

4.2 In October 2011, Duncan Smith reiterated these claims at the Conservative Party conference in where he characterised this underclass as 'chaos and dysfunctionality [...] governed by a perverse set of values' (in Mulholland 2011). This perspective was underscored by Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, who used his turn on the conference podium to make the claim that 'Our feral underclass is too big, has been growing, and needs to be diminished'.^[2] Indeed, in the aftermath of the riots the underclass 'explanation' was reproduced by the majority of mainstream politicians and 'expert' pundits and even by some on the far left, such as the minor political party, the *Independent Working Class Association* (IWCA), which posted an online article in response to the riots which stated that the rioters were not 'alienated working class youth' but 'lumpen elements [that] represent a grouping that is quite separate from, and actively hostile to, the interests and well-being of the working class proper' (IWCA 2011). 'Even for Marx', one IWCA member commented, 'for whom all history is the history of class struggle, the lumpen-underclass was worthy of contempt, not compassion' (IWCA 2011).

4.3 The consensus that these were 'the riots of the underclass' signalled that the 'underclass theories' which had been imported into Britain from the US in the 1980s were being reinvigorated and relegitimated in the public sphere.^[3] This raises a series of questions, among them: What does the term 'underclass' mean in these claims? And what ideological work is the conceptual frame of the underclass doing in these representations of the riots, the rioters and the families and communities from which they heralded?

The lumpen history of the underclass

5.1 As John Welshman (2006) details in *Underclass: A History of the Excluded, 1880–2000*, the concept of the underclass has been the source of intensive debate and critique over more than three decades. The underclass is broadly understood in political and policy terms, and within wider popular culture, as a term that refers to a population 'distinct from the working class – [...] a rootless mass divorced from the means of production – definable only in terms of social inefficiency, and hence not strictly a class in neo-Marxist sense' (Macnicol in Welshman 2006: xii). Whilst Marxist understandings of class conceptualise class formations as historically contingent and relational – classes are formed through antagonism and struggle – the concept of the underclass describes an adjunct class divorced from the body politic proper. The underclass are imagined as being in excess of class relations proper 'with neither chance nor need of readmission', and 'beyond redemption' (Bauman 1998: 66). In this sense, as the IWCA argued in response to the riots, the underclass conceptually corresponds to those whom Marx designated the lumpenproletariat, his pejorative name for those populations who are liminal to the majority moral and political community. For example, in *The Communist Manifesto* Marx famously defines the lumpen as the '"dangerous class", the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society' (Marx 1848).

5.2 In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (Marx 1852), Marx explores the political crisis in France between 1848 and 1851, reflecting on why revolutionary movements succeed or fail at different historical moments. His conclusion in the case of France during these three years was that the failure of the workers' uprising was a consequence of fluid social-economic conditions. France in this period was still making the epochal transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. The labour market in France wasn't yet bonded to industrial capital, 'the bricks and mortar of factory walls' (Bauman 2000: 116) and, as a consequence, there were many heterogeneous class-factions in play. Too many factions to constitute an effective proletariat revolutionary mass. In short, Marx suggests that it was because industrial capitalism was not yet the overriding economic force in French society that another revolution was impeded (see Hayes 1988). To make this argument Marx extends his use of the lumpen to describe the 'scum, offal, refuse' of all social classes, offering an account of how this 'scum' were recruited by Louis Bonaparte, with the support of the equally lumpen 'finance aristocracy', to liquidate the workers' uprising. Marx's loathing for this 'indefinite, disintegrated mass' of tricksters, prostitutes and ex-slaves, is tangible:

Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaux [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars — in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither [...] from this kindred element Bonaparte [...] constitutes himself chief of the lumpenproletariat [...] recognises in this scum, offal, refuse of all classes the only class upon which he can base himself unconditionally (Marx 1852).

5.3 Let us be clear, Marx is ostensibly concerned in this essay with developing a richer understanding of the contingencies of class: 'class as an unstable yoking together, through political rhetoric, of heterogeneous groups' and 'class as shaped and transformed by state processes' (Stallybrass 1990: 70). Yet it is Marx the writer, not state actors or agents, who lumps together all liminal, displaced, criminal and disenfranchised peoples into a singular revolting political foe. In his hands this 'overflowing heterogeneity'

of foul and exotic others are reformed as a 'coagulating mass', a scapegoat for Bonaparte's coup d'état (Stallybrass 1990: 72, 74). The paradox here is that in order to explain the failure of the political efforts of the urban proletariat and their bourgeois supporters to effect a revolution Marx found himself compelled to invent a new abject 'classless class'.

5.4 It is also important to note that 'lumpen' was a fashionable class pejorative in Germany at the time – and it was also an English slang term for the workhouse. Further, as Peter Stallybrass details, Marx's disgusted description of the lumpen cites both 'the structure and the content of the descriptions of the street people of nineteenth-century Paris and London that fill the pages of novelists, journalists, and social analysts' (Stallybrass 1990: 75). Marx was drawing, then, upon an existing 'political formula' for the undeserving poor as fabricated in the popular culture of the time (Williams 1960: 319). This citational history reveals Marx to be caught up in a prevailing hysteria of pejorative class naming (Stallybrass 1990). Indeed, describing Marx's depiction of the lumpen as a 'hateful' myth, Jacques Rancière argues that Marx is complicit with a contemporary nineteenth-century bourgeois fascination with and disgust for the poor (Rancière 2004: 96).^[4]

The culturalisation of inequalities

6.1 If the lumpen are the abject of the 19th Century noble proletariat, the underclass are the abject of 21st Century neoliberal subject-citizens: the entrepreneurial, individualised, self-managing and flexible workers of 'liquid societies' (Bauman 2000). As Bauman argues, in his critique of the term, the underclass are 'the aggregate product of wrong individual choices; proof of the "choice incompetence" of its members' (Bauman 1998: 71). In this regard, as John Westergaard suggests, the 'underclass' is reminiscent of the much older 'culture of poverty' hypothesis, '[b]ut this newer variant is distinct by the resoluteness of its conception of class as a matter of voluntarily adopted lifestyles – good versus evil – essentially unconditioned by economic structure' (Westergaard 1995: 117). This understanding of class was evident in responses to the riots. For example, the Prime-Minister, David Cameron, in his first public response to the riots on 15 August 2011 in a speech at a youth centre in his Witney constituency, attributed the riots to a 'slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations'. Cameron argued that 'these riots were not about poverty' but rather 'about behaviour', and that 'Young people smashing windows and stealing televisions is not about inequality' (in Stratton 2011). The consensus that emerged in the aftermath of the riots – that a morally deficient underclass was to blame – was arguably fomented in Britain the late 1990s, when the New Labour government symbolically unshackled poverty from economic inequalities and reframed it a psycho-cultural problem. For example, in his first speech as Prime-Minister Tony Blair described the biggest challenge of Government as tackling 'an underclass of people cut off from society's mainstream, without any sense of shared purpose', a 'new workless class' characterised by 'the dead weight of low expectations' and 'dependent on benefits and the black economy' (Blair 1997). By blaming the deficient subjectivities of the poor for the disadvantaged situations in which they find themselves, and by championing 'hard-working families', the New Labour government systematically re-scripted problems of economic inequality and stagnant social mobility into matters of individual aspiration, will and choice. As sociologists such as Beverly Skeggs and more recently journalists such as Owen Jones have argued, the discourses of aspiration and meritocracy that saturated public culture and policy documents in the 1990s effectively re-branded poverty as deserved (Skeggs 2004; Jones 2011). A decade later, what is the lasting impact of this political myth-making?

6.2 In 2009, Louise Bamfield and Tim Horton's research project 'Understanding Attitudes to Tackling Economic Inequality' (funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation) drew on quantitative and qualitative research with a cross-section of the British Public to reveal the extent to which the idea that **inequalities are deserved**, had become embedded as a form of common sense. What they revealed is 'a widespread belief about the availability of opportunity, resulting in highly individualised explanations of unequal outcomes' (2009: 26). In other words, there is a consensus in contemporary Britain that the majority of people have plenty of opportunities to 'pull themselves out of poverty' through hard work and therefore that unemployment and poverty is caused not by government or the structural inequalities effected by neoliberal policies, but rather by individual 'bad choices' and 'laziness' (see also Atkinson et al. 2012). As Bamfield and Horton detail, this belief, **that inequalities are deserved**, shapes negative, judgemental and punitive attitudes towards the non-working poor – understood as an underclass distinct from the working and middle classes.

6.3 It is important not to under-estimate the central role of media institutions and communication technologies in reinforcing the ideology of the underclass. As Stoller notes, 'it can be no coincidence that the contemporary change in social attitudes to those in poverty has come about in a time when a swathe of media coverage has become increasingly hostile to, and disparaging of, those who are poor' (Stoller 2012). The figure that organises and legitimates this political field is the revolting figure of the profligate, criminalised welfare recipient. As the relentless accounts of 'welfare cheats' and 'benefit scroungers' within political speeches, news media, reality TV programming (Jensen 2013) and everyday conversational life suggest, in neoliberal Britain the idea of the existence of this parasitical underclass has become thoroughly entrenched as popular common sense.

6.4 One of the consequences of this shift in popular representations and public understandings of inequality is that while during previous recent economic recessions social attitudes towards the working and non-working poor has softened as opportunities for finding work have diminished, during the current economic down-turn, public attitudes towards poverty are hardening. As Tony Stoller argues 'People are blaming poverty on 'laziness', with more than half believing that social security benefits are too high. Fewer than one third now say they would be willing to pay higher taxes to support schools, the NHS or the environment' (Stoller 2012). If the neoliberal object of repulsion is the 'Big State' – and in particular the welfare state – the underclass is the popular name for this abject(ion).

Penal pornography

7.1 The underclass was given popular physiognomical expression in the rogues' galleries of CCTV images of accused rioters, circulated by the police in the aftermath of the riots and featured on the front covers of many national newspapers and on numerous vigilante social media pages. 'Shop a Moron' was the headline on the front page of *The Sun* on 10 August, 2011, as it launched a campaign encouraging readers to 'Name and Shame a Rioter'. Its front-page invited readers to examine the faces and bodies (as captured on CCTV) of those pictured for evidence of inherent signs of physical, mental and moral defects. News media journalists were transformed into vigilante crime fighters, inviting the public to assist them in cleaning up the streets: 'Let's all nail the scum by joining the army of police and disgusted members of the public who have started identifying the rioters', wrote the journalist Ross Kaniuk in *The Daily Star*. 'If you also have a picture to put out or can identify yobs in others' photos, then help put the filth who brought terror to our streets in the dock' (Kaniuk 2011). The police toured their rogues' galleries through British cities and towns on digital display vans. Parking in riot-affected shopping areas, these public exhibitions of alleged offenders were used to encourage passing shoppers to identify those who had taken part. As Wacquant argues, the proliferation of these kinds of 'law-and-order pornography' suggest that 'the death of the "spectacle of the scaffold" has been greatly exaggerated' (Wacquant 2010: 206).

7.2 A few days after its 'Shop a Moron' headline, *The Sun* crafted a 'Shop an Edwardian Moron' feature, composed of police mug shots of 'petty pilferers' detained, shamed and punished a century earlier for minor crimes (*The Sun* 2011b). The irony, uncommented upon in *The Sun*, was the dramatic differences in punishment meted out to the Edwardian 'petty pilferers' and the petty looters in 2011. While one Walter Glenson was jailed for a week for stealing two packets of cocoa in 1907, Nicolas Robinson was jailed for six months for stealing a case of bottled water worth £3.50 during the riots. Sixteen-year-old Ricky Gemmell was sentenced to 16 weeks in prison for uttering the phrase, 'I'd smash you if you took your uniform off' to a police-officer (Addley et al. 2011).^[5] Dane Williamson, misidentified and apprehended as he shopped with friends in Manchester city-centre and then wrongfully charged and imprisoned for setting fire to a shop, had his flat burnt down in a revenge attack whilst he was detained. The riots and the extraordinary media and judicial responses they prompted were symptomatic of the wider acceleration and inflation of 'penal activity conceived, represented, and implemented for the primary purpose of being displayed in ritualised form by the authorities' (Wacquant 2010: 206).

From the workhouse to workfare

8.1 The *Guardian*-LSE research project, *Reading the Riots* has estimated that 75% of those who rioted were under 24, about half were in full-time education either at school or college/university, and amongst the rest a considerable minority were unemployed (Ball et al. 2011). One in five young people in Britain between the ages of 16 and 24 are currently defined as NEETS (an acronym for people currently not in education, employment, or training), although this is higher in many of the urban areas affected by riots. This represents about one million young people for whom everyday life is shaped by a crisis of possibility. The idea of a future in which their ability to participate actively in the social life of the state is radically uncertain (Berlant 2011). Many of those who participated in the riots described their actions as a specific response to heightening inequalities of opportunity felt most acutely in the closing of youth centres and services, the slashing of the Educational Maintenance Allowance, the tripling of University fees and rising youth unemployment. As one rioter explained:

I literally went there to say, 'All right then, well, everyone's getting free stuff, I'm joining in', like, 'cos, it's fucking my area. These fucking shops, like, I've given them a hundred CVs ... not one job. That's why I left my house (Lewis et al. 2011: 26).

However, in his response to the riots, David Cameron argued that a *culture* of worklessness was to blame:

[There] is a moral hazard in our welfare system – people thinking they can be as irresponsible as they like because the state will always bail them out. ... I want us to look at toughening up the conditions for those who are out of work and receiving benefits and speeding up our efforts to get all those who can work back to work (Cameron in Stratton 2011).

Similarly, the historian Andrew Roberts commented in the after-math of the riots, '[t]he violence in England's streets is no working-class insurrection but the uprising of the non-working, anti-working, would-do-anything-sooner-than-work class' (Roberts 2011). The perversity of these political responses to the riots lies in their relentless promotion of the idea that welfare support systems are responsible for worklessness (Shildrick et al. 2012).

8.2 The riots were capitalised upon as evidence of claims, (made first by New Labour) that *Britain is Broken* and that *fixing* Britain requires novel forms of state-intervention. These are not interventions that aim to enrich state support for deprived populations – through, for example, programmes to tackle hostile relations between the police and young people, or public welfare programmes targeted to alleviate youth unemployment – but, on the contrary, programmes that involve the further erosion of state support systems and the proliferation of penal systems aimed to coerce individuals to 'take responsibility for themselves'. It was notable that amongst the first responses to the riots was a call for rioters to be forced into work ('workfare' regimes), along with calls for the removal of welfare support and social housing not only from those who had participated in the riots but also from their families. On 11 August 2011, a government e-petition calling for rioters to lose welfare benefits hit 100,000 signatures and made British history as the first of such e-petitions (a new technology encouraged and set up by the Government) to be considered for debate in parliament.

8.3 Since the riots the Government has accelerated its £5 billion workfare programme. 'The Work Programme' is targeted towards young people in receipt of welfare benefits and under this and other schemes, such as 'The Mandatory Work Activity scheme' and 'the Community Action Programme', unemployed people determined 'fit for work' are forced (under threat of sanctions) to work without pay, in the voluntary sector and private sector, in order to retain meagre benefit entitlements. Amongst the private contractors paid to deliver these new workfare regimes are the notorious global securities companies G4S and SERCO.^[6]

8.4 These workfare programmes are symptomatic of the neoliberal maxim: 'One must govern for the market, rather than because of the market' (Foucault 2008: 121). Governing for the market entails the tentacles of government extending and penetrating into every stratum of social and cultural life, working tirelessly to unblock impediments to capital, to deregulate resource-extraction and to 'securitise' profits for the new global corporate class of the super-rich. As governments have come to govern *for* the markets they have also come to govern *against* the people. The protections and freedoms which post-Second World War liberal democracies once ostensibly offered citizens in return for their loyalty and labour have been incrementally eroded. Thus, on the one hand, neoliberal political discourses are state-phobic, and on the other hand neoliberalism demands continuous, repressive interventions by the state.

8.5 Penal responses to unemployment are premised on two myths. The first is that a significant group of people don't want to work and prefer a life of welfare dependence and poverty (MacDonald et al. 2010). The second is that full employment is achievable in a deproletarianised market economy. It isn't (Theodore 2007); labour insecurity and the vertiginous inequalities it effects are a direct consequence of neoliberal economic and social policies. The disintegration of secure forms of waged labour and the falling apart of effective agencies of political representation and collective action (such as unions) are the constitutive conditions of neoliberal governmentality. This is the policy of deliberate 'precarization' that Bauman describes in *Liquid Modernity*:

'Flexibility' is the slogan of the day, and when applied to the labour market it augurs an end to the 'job as we know it', announcing instead the advent of work on short-term contracts, rolling contracts or no contracts, positions with no in-built security but with the 'until further notice' clause. Working life is saturated with uncertainty (Bauman 2000: 147).

8.6 That those who cannot even enter into this market, 'the most expendable, disposable and exchangeable parts of the economic system' (Bauman 2000: 152), have diminished aspirations and little hope, reveals not a culture of anti-work, but a lack of expectations born out of experience. For the political classes to argue that work is the solution to the criminal behaviour of rioters exculpates their own responsibility for 'the material deprivation, family hardship, temporal uncertainty and personal anxiety' which neoliberal governmentality has effected (Wacquant 2008: 25). For some of the rioters it was precisely the abject feelings of worthlessness induced by long-term unemployment which they used to attempt to legitimate their participation in violent disorder. As one rioter put it:

All I can tell you is that me, myself and the group I was in, none of us have got jobs, yeah? I been out of work now coming up two years ... and it's just like a depression, man, that you sink into ... I felt like I needed to be there as well to just say 'Look, this is what's gonna happen if there's no jobs offered to us out there' (Lewis et al. 2011: 25).

The underclass does not exist

9.1 In *Culture and Society* (1960), Raymond Williams made the famous claim that 'the masses don't exist'. In making this claim, Williams was concerned with detailing the emergence of the concept of 'the masses' as a name for the working class under industrial capitalism. 'The masses' emerged to describe processes of urbanisation, factory work and mass-production, and latterly 'the social and political massing' of the working classes: through, for example, unionisation and the emergence of working class cultures (Williams 1960: 317). However, 'the masses' Williams argued, was also just a new word for the mob 'and the traditional characteristics of the mob were retained in its significance: gullibility, fickleness, herd prejudice, lowness of taste and habit' (Williams 1960: 318). It is worth quoting Williams at some length here:

The masses are always the others, whom we don't know, and can't know. [...] To other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people. There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses. In an urban industrial society there are many opportunities for such ways of seeing. The point is not to reiterate the objective conditions but to consider, personally and collectively, what these have done to our thinking. The fact is, surely, that a way of seeing other people which has become characteristic of our kind of society has been capitalised for the purposes of political or cultural exploitation. [...] we mass them, and interpret them, according to some convenient formula. Within its terms, the formula will hold. *Yet it is the formula, not the mass, which it is our real business to examine. The political formula by means of which it seems possible to convert the majority of one's fellow human beings into masses, and thence into something to be hated or feared* (Williams 1960: 319, my emphasis).

9.2 As Williams suggests, the 'conception of persons as masses springs, not from an inability to know them, but from *an interpretation of them according to a formula*' (Williams 1960: 322, my emphasis). Significantly, he reminds us that it is impossible to understand the political formula which gives rise to 'hatred and fear' of the masses without a consideration of mass-communication and its 'multiple transmissions' as a technology of governance (Williams 1960: 319). As he argues, the institutions and

instruments of mass communication, such as newspapers, radio, television, journalism, advertising, 'were not produced by the working people themselves. They were, rather, produced for them by others, often [...] for conscious political or commercial advantage' and often for 'the persuasion of a large number of people to act, feel, think, know, in certain ways' (Williams 1960: 326, 322).

9.3 The lumpen history of the underclass reveals that pejorative class epithets, whatever political project they serve, do not describe existing classes of people, as it is often and variously claimed. This is not to say that underclass does not have significant 'reality effects'. On the contrary, if class, as Williams and others have argued, is a history of names (see Rancière 2004) it is important to consider what these class names 'have done to our thinking' (Williams 1960: 319). That is, to analyse the ways in which forms of classification emerge, are mediated and reproduced 'for the purposes of political or cultural exploitation' (Williams 1960: 319). In critically interrogating discourses of the underclass, then, it is imperative that we focus not on the question of whether an underclass empirically exists, but rather on the political function of this classification and in particular, the ways it is employed to persuade people to act, feel, think about poverty and disadvantage in specific ways.

9.4 Gilroy suggests that the corporatisation of systems of mass communication has restrained civil freedoms and diminished diversity of expression. As he states 'our tactics for understanding our defence of our communities have to take those changes into account' (Gilroy 2011). These tactics include counter-hegemonic aesthetic practices through which to communicate and disseminate alternative understandings of poverty and disadvantage. As Gilroy observes, the political elites (on the left and the right) act as a class – 'if we want to act as a body, if we want to act in concert, we have to learn something from the way they conduct themselves, even as we challenge what they do' (Gilroy 2011). What Gilroy identifies is the need to be more systematic both in our thinking about – and our practices of resistance to – neoliberal governmentality by recognising the specific ways that 'the role of information, of policing, of deprivation, of inequality' function in concert (Gilroy 2011).

Conclusion: a poverty of imagination

10.1 It is the argument of this article that the re-emergence of discourses of the underclass in response to the 2011 riots must be understood as part of much longer effort to procure consent for the unrolling of neoliberal economic and social policies that 'punish the poor' (Wacquant 2010). For, as I have detailed, even while the riots were still taking place, the political elites began capitalising upon these events as a means of legitimating a further programme of austerity-driven welfare reforms – such as 'workfare' – which punish the most socially marginal and economically disadvantaged citizens within the British state.

10.2 As research into the causes of the riots has revealed, for many of the rioters it was their sense of being invisible, of being stigmatised, of having no future prospects, which motivated their disorderly behaviour (Slater 2011). Contrary to claims that these riots were 'senseless', many of those participants interviewed described the riots as an opportunity to air grievances (against the police and the Government). However misguided their actions, they wanted their experiences of unemployment, poverty, inequality and injustice to be recognised. However, the violence and criminality unleashed in the riots did not effect an alternative aesthetics. The public haven't come to perceive Britain's disenfranchised youth differently. On the contrary, the mediation of the riots – as the riots of the underclass – has entrenched beliefs that inequality is deserved and has further stigmatised the impoverished communities from which the vast majority of rioters hailed. In other words, the rioters became the objects they had been told they were and, in so doing, confirmed the consensus that they were the product of their own 'chaos and dysfunctionality' and that of their families (Duncan Smith in Mulholland 2011). In short, the conceptual and perceptual frame of the underclass was operationalised as a means of explaining and containing the meaning of the August riots as apolitical, whilst also usefully serving as 'definitive proof' of the existence of a population defined by their 'antisocial behaviours' (Wacquant 2008: 24). However, if one of the consequences of these riots is that they have procured consent for a political backlash against Britain's poor, these events also present an important opportunity to rethink sociological understandings of class-based inequalities and the forms of marginality which underclass discourses reproduce.

10.3 To contest the perceptual frame of the underclass it is imperative, as Les Back (2007, 2009) has so passionately argued, for sociologists to revitalise the art and craft of listening which are central to ethnographic practice (see also Bassel 2013). This listening is taking multiple forms, such as the facilitation of conversations between sociologists, community activists, teachers and young people – exemplified by Goldsmiths College's 'Responding to the Riots' workshop in December 2011.^[7] In the longer term what these kinds of practices of listening enable are the emergence of alternative political aesthetics with which to narrate class struggle in neoliberal Britain.^[8]

10.4 My central claim here, is that if we want critically to contest neoliberal social and economic policies and the downward social mobility and deepening inequalities which these policies engender, it is necessary to challenge the discourses of the underclass which currently underpin public understandings of poverty and disadvantage. We must start instead from the premise that the underclass is a political formulation that must be contested.

Notes

¹This article emerged out of a larger book project, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, which is concerned with deepening critical understandings of 'how stigmatisation operates as a form of governance which legitimises the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and

injustices' (Tyler 2013: 8).

²Ken Clarke's speech can be viewed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/8806128/Conservative-Party-Conference-2011-we-must-tackle-feral-underclass-says-Ken-Clarke.html>

³The New Labour Government (1997–2010) had distanced itself from the language of the underclass, preferring the more 'neutral' language of social exclusion while nevertheless drawing on 'underclass theory'.

⁴Loïc Wacquant similarly describes the neoliberal concept of underclass as a 'demonic legend' (Wacquant 2008: 204).

⁵In 2010, the Government estimated that it costs on average £50,000 a year keep a petty criminal in prison, and about £2,800 to administer a community sentence over the same period (McFarlane 2010).

⁶See the campaign group *boycott welfare* for details of the workfare schemes in Britain and the companies sponsoring them: <http://www.boycottworkfare.org>

⁷This event was facilitated by the Centre for Urban and Community Research and the Sociology Society and included speakers from Reprezent 107.3 FM, South London Gallery's young people's forum Art Assassins, and staff from the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths. Thanks to Dr Alison Rooke for conversations about this event.

⁸'Dear England' (2011) the hip-hop response of English-Iranian activist and rapper Lowkey (Kareem Dennis) to the riots, and musician Plan B's song 'Ill Manors' (2011) are excellent examples of counter-political aesthetic responses to the riots.

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