'Urban Safaris': Looting, Consumption and Exclusion in London 2011

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Abstract

This paper examines the prevalence and relevance of looting for understanding the 2011 English riots. It begins by distinguishing these riots from previous British riots by arguing that although looting is by no means a new phenomena looting nevertheless became central to discussions, interpretations and recollections of the riots. The paper will explore public and media responses to the looting and will focus on the uses of looting as a means of identifying a feral underclass of people seen to be morally and culturally separate from mainstream society. By unpicking the relationships between looting and what currently stands for 'consumer culture', the paper will argue that looting is seen as the lowest common denominator of mob behaviour since its focus is deemed to be entirely apolitical. The paper will look towards current understandings of consumer culture to try to make sense of the looting. It will argue that whilst there is now a good deal of literature exploring the relationships between judgments of taste and the reproduction of existing class structures and barriers, there is virtually nothing examining the relationships between consumption and social exclusion.

I will argue in this paper that exclusion is crucial in providing a comprehensive understanding of the looting. In particular, I suggest that Bourdieusian accounts of the effects of popular expressions of disgust at the looters can offer only a partial understanding of the looting, since they do not explain the strength of desire for consumer goods. In order to address this, the paper expands on cultural capital discourses by incorporating the concept of 'emotional capital' into the analysis. The paper concludes by arguing that we should not be surprised by the widespread looting that took place in August 2011 given that advanced consumer society is characterised by common feelings and emotions and that many of the looters were not part of the original riots but opportunists who took advantage of the lack of police presence.

Introduction

1.1 In their study of nineteenth century cities, Thernstrom and Sennett argued that cities are dense, various and virtually impossible to control and because of this, middle class people seek ways of feeling safe, and achieving some sort of stability (1969). The authors argue that one way in which they achieve this is by relocating to the relative safety of the suburbs but also via their responses to public disorder which enable the creation of a common, faceless enemy which provides an outlet and a distraction for personal feelings of frustration and a lack of satisfaction with the city. Citing the example of urban violence triggered by worker's strikes in nineteenth century Chicago, they argue that:

The outbreak of violence was a catalyst for them [the middle class], giving them in the figure of the "other", the stranger, the foreigner, a generalized agent of disorder and disruption. (1969: 416)

1.2 Such accounts of public anxieties at outbreaks of violence are nothing new. Indeed, the public and media response to the looting following the rioting in August 2011 could easily be framed as 'moral panics' (see Hall et al. 1978; Cohen 2011) in terms of the popular positioning of the looting as a new and unique form of violence; as symptomatic of wider, more entrenched and historical social problems, such as a decline in morals, a lack of community cohesion and an increase in selfishness and individuality (see Cohen 2011: viii). I argue that each of these features of moral panics were prevalent in the widespread media responses to the looting. The responses of many British newspapers might be seen to reflect this definition of a moral panic by combining narratives of shock and anger at the looters with a sense that looting signified a more general lack of respect or decency. For example the front page of *The Sun* on 10 August encouraged readers to 'Shop a Moron' (France & Hughes 2011) with CCTV images of individual looters and 'yobs wrecking our country'; the Daily Mail described the riots and looting as tantamount to

anarchy; and the Daily Express vowed to 'Sweep Scum From Our Streets' via a clean-up operation organised by the 'vast majority of decent, law-abiding' citizens (see also Allen & Taylor 2013; Jensen 2013). The discourses presented in these media presented a story of the looting as one of 'us and them', of the inarticulate, moronic minority perceived to be lacking in morals and respect versus the respectable majority of moral, law-abiding and community oriented individuals.

1.3 One of the uses of the moral panic concept is in exploring the particularly *emotive* responses to outbreaks of violence. It was certainly the case that many corners of the media chose to dramatise and emotionalise the looting. They did this by firstly, offering a narrative of looting that appeared to suggest that the looting was exceptional in terms of its newsworthiness, but at the same time providing derisive descriptions of the animalistic impulsive drives of looters that seemed very familiar. Many newspaper reports also focused on the looters' 'lack of positive emotional ties' with their families and broader community. For example a Daily Mail article on 13 August 2011 reported on the lack of presence of parents at the hearings of young offenders following the looting echoing David Cameron's speech to the Commons in which he derided the riots and looting as a 'consequence of [parental] neglect and immorality' (Shipman 2011). The media response worked to perpetuate a fear and common dread of those below but also reiterated a sense of common solidarity (for example via the clean-up operation) and shared values and moral consensus.

1.4 In what follows, the paper will delve deeper into the meanings behind the looting and the popular responses to the looters. It will critically assess the assertion that looting is something new or unique to 2011 by contrasting the events of August 2011 with previous examples of riotous behaviour in recent British history and exploring both similarities and differences between these examples. The paper will argue that widespread condemnation and 'fear' of the looting mob is historically quite familiar in Britain and will apply recent notions of 'dangerous consumption' in order to unpick some of the relationships between contemporary consumer society and looting. It will also examine popular media responses to the looting and consider how these responses reflect a broader framing of the working class as 'vulgar', 'tasteless' and lacking in value (see also Jensen 2013; McKenzie 2013; Tyler 2013). Finally, by drawing on the concept of 'emotional capital' (Nowotny 1981), the paper makes some useful theoretical advancements for the understanding of the collectivity and sociality of emotions. In particular I will argue that emotional capital helps to offer an explanation of the 'party' or 'carnival' atmosphere described by many participants and observers of the riots and looting.

1981–2011; Similarities and differences

2.1 Marxist accounts of class struggle are a useful place to begin to understand that British industrial history is defined by protest and unrest. From the controversial Corn Laws of 1815 and the subsequent food riots in London that year, to the Militant Suffrage Movement of the early twentieth century, to the industrial unrest and race relations protests of the 1980s, riots and various forms of civil unrest have long been important triggers not only for illuminating the plight of particular marginalised and 'excluded' social groups, but also for the implementation of often radical legislative, political and social change. Following the Brixton Riots of 1981, Lord Scarman's report of the public Inquiry (Scarman 1981) cited 'racial disadvantage and discrimination' as key triggers for the swell of resentment leading to the riots and recommended changes in policing and law enforcement including positive discrimination in the recruitment of Black police officers. Common to all of the aforementioned riots are discourses of injustice, discrimination and inequality. The political sociologist, Richard Sennett (1970: 31) argued in 1970 that rioters are frequently bound together by very little but their poverty; their common sense of not having anything or anything to lose. Following the German thinker Ferdinand Tönnies's famous concepts of 'Gemeinschaft' and 'Gesellschaft', Sennett distinguishes between 'community' and 'group life', the former of which is crucial in fostering a sense of 'common identity' and concurrent feelings of value and self worth and the latter of which refers to individual and impersonal relationships. Sennett believes that acknowledging lack of community life for some and ignoring resentment and tensions between different groups (including between those who have community and those who don't) is to risk further unrest and social disorder. He argues that:

... if men continue to believe that hostility between social groups should be muted, not encouraged in its social expression, the cities will continue to burn, for nothing exists socially now to mediate hostility, to force people to look beyond their images of threatening outsiders to the actual outsiders themselves. (Sennett 1970: 147)

2.2 Sennett's words have remarkable pertinence when considering violent, social unrest and rioting between 1981 and 2011 where critical discussions of exclusion, poverty and community breakdown were not only discouraged but were also often met with hostility particularly from the media. Instead, recent riots have frequently been understood in terms of 'us and them' rhetoric, firstly in terms of mainstream responses to the riots and secondly with regards to expressions of exclusion from the rioters themselves, whether from opportunities for employment or from the criminal justice system. As Sennett points out, most rioting is also notable for being preceded by a general lack of belief in the importance of expression of feelings of exclusion and breakup of community life. Indeed, in this paper, I argue that narratives of 'us and them' and 'insiders and outsiders' are actively encouraged in popular culture, and in particular in consumer culture where the rhetoric of the 'respectable' versus tasteless and inappropriate consumption is commonplace (Skeggs 1997; etc.). However, for now, I want to focus in more detail on the features of previous British riots and to explore how they contrast with the London 2011 riots.

2.3 Lord Scarman's Inquiry into the 1981 Brixton riots concluded that the riots were an outburst of violence against the police, and that local community leaders and police should share the blame in the breakdown in communications. There was, using Sennett's thesis, a lack of dialogue between hostile social groups and this absence of expression led to the escalation of resentment. The Inquiry also made clear the

extent to which increasing unemployment coupled with discrimination against the Black community in a variety of ways including controversial stop and search procedures were vital contributory factors. Similarly the 1991 riots on the Meadowell estate in Tyneside (in the North East of England) were triggered by local anger at the deaths of two local teenagers whose stolen car was chased by police at high speeds. Both riots are also remembered as being inflamed by a slow build up of anger and resentment at the police as well as by concentrated high levels of unemployment and exclusion. The Meadowell estate for example was built in the 1930s to re-house shipyard workers from the slums in North Shields. By the mid 1980s with the closure of the shipyards, unemployment had reached 80% in some parts of the estate (Barke & Turnbull 1992: 65). According to Barke and Turnbull (1992: 87) although the Meadowell estate lies only eight miles from the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, only very few of the estate's residents visited the city with any regularity. Here, exclusion can be understood not only in terms of material poverty, but also as a type of physical separation from mainstream public life.

2.4 The point about both the 1981 Brixton riots and the 1991 Meadowell riots is that ultimately there was some public sympathy for the rioters: in the first case, this was evidenced by Scarman's Inquiry; and by the regeneration of the Meadowell estate following the 'Meadowell Initiative' of 1991. In some ways the 2011 London riots appear similar to notable preceding British riots. They began seemingly in response to anger at police, in the case of the London riots for the shooting of Mark Duggan and the rioters predominantly came from areas of high deprivation and unemployment. However, in amongst the similarities there are some notable differences. The first is the use of social media technology in organising the riots (although there were reports of this in 1981 with rioters communicating via portable radios); the second is Prime Minister David Cameron's resistance to a full public inquiry and his assertion that the riots were absolutely not like previous riots which were fuelled by racial discrimination, poverty or unemployment. Rather, Cameron asserted, the August 2011 riots were 'criminality pure and simple'. The third key difference is the widespread looting which accompanied the riots which differed from previous examples of looting in the UK because of its scale and luminosity. It is this third point that I want to develop in this paper and explore in greater detail.

2.5 To begin with, looting during riots is nothing new. In 1981 in Brixton, 117 premises were damaged and looted and the Toxteth and Moss Side riots of the same year saw extensive, widespread and sporadic looting including of banks, and at Meadowell on 1991 all shops on the estate were looted. However, there are three key differences with regards to looting during the 2011 riots.

2.6 The first is the absolute scale of the looting that is significant; 2,500 shops and businesses were looted during the rioting in 2011 and looting represented the most common type of unlawful activity recorded in August 2011. The second key difference was the extent of the emphasis by the press on looting which appeared to create the most outrage and morally framed responses. Thirdly, the looters were far more numerous than the initial protestors and many people looted without taking part in any of the disorder that occurred earlier. Furthermore, according to data collected by the Guardian/LSE 'Reading the Riots' study (2011), looters tended to be from a broader demographic than the rioters, with far more women and children looting than took part in the preceding disorder. For the purposes of this paper, riots are defined as *violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd* (Oxford English Dictionary 2013) and although it is acknowledged that looting might also correspond with this definition, I argue that a distinction between rioting and looting is necessary owing to the specificity of looting as a type of riotous behavior, especially the fact that looters comprised a different demographic to those who had rioted earlier and in particular that there was little evidence that looting was a form of protest at the death of Mark Duggan. I thus distinguish between the two activities of rioting and looting. Notably, during the Guardian/LSE study, many looters described feelings of anger, excitement and euphoria (explaining that it was 'like a party' or a carnival) and only very few mentioned the police shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham^[1] or anger at the police when asked to describe their motivations for looting.

2.7 Fashion retailers and stores containing high value electronic goods, sportswear and jewellery were commonly, although not exclusively, targeted by looters. Notably, the focus was often on shops containing goods with resale potential and in London most of the looting appeared spontaneous occurring away from the City centre near to the homes of looters. The shopping centre in Tottenham, north London, badly affected by looting is slightly away from Tottenham's town centre and consists solely of big chain stores such as Comet, JD Sports, PC World, Argos and Next. Some of the looters attempted to justify their looting here by arguing that they were merely 'stealing from thieves' or the major consumer brands who they felt had been preying on their exclusion for years in any case (Adegoke & Lewis 2011). The authors interviewed a small number of young looters living in south east London and found that taking from big, 'faceless' businesses in an out of town shopping centre felt like an easy option because of their own lack of connectedness from the shop owners and also from the geographical location of the shopping centre.

2.8 Bhattacharyya et al. (2012) make a similar point in their article about looting and rioting in Birmingham. They show that much of the looting in Birmingham focused on the City centre, an area which the authors argue, the rioters felt sufficiently dislocated from to 'enact violence, precisely because they are not treading on anyone else's turf, and because it contains all the consumer outlets that have further transformed it into a space that could be virtually anywhere in the Western World' (2012: 4.3).

2.9 Clearly then, it is important to distinguish geographical differences in patterns of looting and to recognise that not all looting involved large corporate chains. However, this paper will focus on looting of large high street chains in part because it seeks to argue that the various responses to this type of looting specifically reflected deeper, enduring popular accounts of a deviant mob of undeserving consumers.

Fear of the mob – dangerous consumption

3.1 In this section, I develop the notion that looters were frequently depicted as a fearful, violent mob and I examine the implications for this in terms of offering any comprehensive understanding of how looting developed to such a grand scale in London in 2011. In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, George Orwell remarked on widespread 'fear of the mob', the consequence of which, he argued was to reinforce deceptive and unreal distinctions between the rich and poor. He wrote:

Fear of the mob is a superstitious fear. It is based on the idea that there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and poor... But in reality there is no such difference. The mass of rich and poor are differentiated by their incomes and nothing else. (2011: 67)

3.2 Sennett similarly is critical of explanations of riots as 'irrational, directionless, aggression' (1969: 397) and also of the notion that it is the psychology of crowds that encourage violence without 'fear or personal detection' (1969: 398). Certainly one of the most popular explanations of the extensive looting in London in 2011 was the idea of a 'mob mentality' and that the apparent nonchalance and lack of fear of detection of looters who brazenly tried on trainers and looted shops in a manner frequently described as blasé was taken as further evidence of a breakdown in normal norms and values governing behaviour. Sennett argues that such accounts of rioting are frequently overstated in order to reinforce feelings of community solidarity among the non-rioters by creating an 'enemy within' or a 'common dread of those below' (1969: 398). In 2011 a renewed sense of community solidarity was visible during the public clean up operation of streets following the looting. The Daily Express newspaper for example carried the front page headline 'Sweep Scum from Our Streets' alongside an image of residents wielding brooms and wearing t-shirts with the slogan 'Looters are Scum' (Reynolds et al. 2011; see also Tyler 2013; Jensen 2013). This might be seen as an example of community solidarity and an attempt to exert control in a city in which as Thernstrom and Sennett (1969) argue is virtually impossible to control. They point out that feelings of lack of satisfaction and personal feelings of frustration run deep across all social classes but that in cities, sporadic moments of violence and disorder serve the purpose of creating a common enemy helping to alleviate these feelings and reinforce community solidarity.

3.3 Certainly popular responses to the looting resorted to and reinforced particular types of 'us and them' dualisms. Looters were routinely described by MPs, the press and a range of other social and political commentators as 'sub-human', 'amoral', 'lacking in respect', 'devoid of guilt or shame', 'wile beasts' and 'like a plague of locusts' with Conservative MP Kenneth Clarke, the then Secretary of State for justice describing the looters as a 'feral underclass, cut off from the mainstream in everything but its mainstream' (2011).

3.4 Popular narratives of looters as sub-human and separate from the mainstream not only serve to reinforce mainstream community solidarity by creating a common enemy, as with Thernstrom and Sennett above, but in addition, these narratives also work to reinforce class and cultural distinctions in other ways. In particular I suggest that the construction of the mob as sub-human and animalistic is part of a wider historical framing of the working classes. Furthermore, I argue that looting and popular responses to it, served to illuminate the complexities of the relationship between individuals and consumer society

3.5 To begin with, after the looting, many remarked that looters were somehow disconnected from consumer society and that the looting was symptomatic of a sense of frustration from their exclusion. Although there is some use in this argument as I will establish later on, it is also inherently problematic, since consumer society relies on people feeling disconnected from it. Critical of attempts to dismiss consumers as 'irrational', Campbell (1987) points out that consumer society is intrinsically unsatisfying for all who are part of it. For Campbell, consumer societies rely on repeated feelings of disappointment rarely matched by feelings of satisfaction. Many of the norms inherent in consumer society, as I have argued elsewhere, reflect a common belief that material wealth is always available to those who work hard enough or who have sufficient talent or expertise (Casey 2008a). Thus, consumption is a means of evidencing status, wealth and skill and our overall investment in the norms of consumer society. From this perspective we consume in order to attempt to reconnect; to feel part of society.

3.6 Baudrillard (2004) expands on this key contradiction underpinning consumer society; namely that simply talking about the 'needs' of consumers is insufficient given that needs are never fully satisfied via consumption. He proposes that the concept of difference is crucial as people constantly seek new ways of consuming signs and images in a bid to enhance individualisation, self-expression and identity. Contrary to the optimistic rhetoric of the 'affluent' capitalist society, Baudrillard argues instead that consumer societies are wrought with tensions, insecurities, envies and conflicts. For Baudrillard, individuals living in advanced consumer societies quickly learn the importance of the multiple possible signs and signifiers of consumption, but in societies where poverty routinely hinders opportunities consumption, deep crises, contradictions and change can develop.

3.7 From this perspective, the widespread looting might not come as a surprise given the central role of consumption as a form of self-expression, and the extent to which in advanced capitalist societies access to material wealth and consumer goods is not available to all. It might be argued then that the looting was simply 'collateral damage' (Bauman 2011) or the inevitable consequence of a profit driven consumer society where a minority are excluded from the rights and privileges (for example, of employment and consumption) enjoyed by others. Similarly, Croghan et al. (2006) have pointed out that consumption is central to the construction of identities and that moral value, worth, status and interpersonal relationships are mediated via the appropriation of consumer goods (Harvey et al. 2013, this collection). They argue that poverty and a lack of access to material resources represent a particular form of social exclusion. Thus in 2011, looters were quick to take up an opportunity made temporarily available to them. People who are socially excluded cannot easily take jobs or money, but here they could take

consumer goods.

3.8 The argument that the looting was in part triggered by collective feelings of exclusion and the associated claim that looting might be seen as a type of protest or expression of anger was broadly critiqued. In particular, some commentators asked how it could be possible to attack a system whilst simultaneously celebrating it by expressing a deep desire for mainstream consumer goods. As Guardian journalist Zoe Williams remarked:

I think it's just about possible that you could see your actions refashioned into a noble cause if you were stealing the staples: bread, milk. But it can't be done while you're nicking trainers, let alone laptops. How can you cease to believe in law and order, a moral universe, co-operation, the purpose of existence, and yet still believe in sportswear? How can you despise culture but still want the flatscreen TV from the bookies? (Williams 2011)

3.9 Other researchers have noted the contradiction between those who participate in 'hedonistic', 'anti-establishment' behaviour whilst investing in values that were very much part of the mainstream (in this case, those of consumer society). South (2002) for example notes that drug taking amongst young offenders is both a hedonistic activity, and at the same time part of materialist mainstream cultural activities (e.g. clubbing). Similarly, although the looting might be described as a hedonistic activity, in terms of the violent pursuit of pleasure it is also an activity which conforms to a mainstream desire for capitalist consumer goods. It is useful here to return to Orwell's assertion that there is no mystical difference between groups of individuals and that the looters were not so cut off from the norms of consumer society as we might imagine.

3.10 In order to develop this argument further we need to shift focus away from differences in groups of individuals *per se* and instead seek to illuminate differences in experiences of consumption. To begin with, we know that there are significant differences by virtue of the fact that not everyone has the same access to consumer society. In particular, working class consumers have fewer resources with which to resist their surveillance and regulatory practices (see for example Skeggs 1997) intended to enforce control by aligning 'political, social and institutional goals with individual pleasures and desires, and with the happiness and fulfillment of the self' (Rose 1990: 257). In contemporary consumer societies, and using the looting as example, surveillance takes the form of various regulatory practices including media and political responses and the particularly punitive sentences for offenders in 2011. Crucially, for Foucault, surveillance is a key means of governing subjectivity and of reinforcing moral codes of behaviour. As Rose (1990) also remarked, everyday life is mapped out by the 'project of freedom', but that late capitalist society is marked by a tension involving both the obligation to be free *and* the social organisation of the management of self. Thus, surveillance acts as a means of governing and monitoring consumer behaviour and also for controlling consumption that is seen to be dangerous or deviant, in this case, looting.

3.11 The concept of surveillance has particular reticence for understanding the relationship between consumption and class identities and is also useful in attempting to shed light on the particular features of the looting. Other authors have pointed to the various ways in which dominant groups have derided the particular modes of protest (for example, Lawler 2002) and of consumption (for example in Casey's (2010) discussion of the consumer 'riots' at Edmonton, north London in 2004) amongst working class and other marginalised groups. Here I argue that in many ways the language adopted by those describing the looters was notably similar to the routine discourses of working class consumers. The rap artist Plan B describes the constant surveillance, disregard and negative stereotyping particularly of young working class people which serves to reinforce and reproduce class and cultural distinctions:

Let's all go on an urban safari
We might see some illegal migrants
Oi look there's a chav,
That means council housed and violent
He's got a hoodie on give him a hug,
On second thoughts don't you don't wanna get mugged
(Plan B; Lyrics from 'Ill Manors')

The above lyrics serve as a reminder of the omnipresence of class in contemporary Britain and of the cultural as well as material distinctions between social classes. The song 'Ill Manors' echoes the predominance of discussions about class and particular of mainstream derogatory accounts of the council housed hooded 'chav', but also points to the ways in which fear and loathing of the underclass relies on stories and exaggerated accounts of life which are rarely substantiated by anything other than fleeting observations (Tyler 2013; Jensen 2013).

3.12 Some authors have argued that in late capitalist societies, there is a tendency to look and make judgments of others whilst at the same time maintaining spatial distance from those others. Gidley and Rooke (2010) argue that social exclusion is spatial and that working class people are stigmatised by both space and place. For Gidley and Rooke, the idea that exclusion is spatial is twofold; firstly in terms of the ways in which classed identities are marked by particular stigmatised locations, and secondly a lack of spatial mobility for working class people represents another form of exclusion. The authors point to the contradiction that while there is a good deal of popular rhetoric surrounding life on estates and the cultural practices of the working classes, there is very little macro discourse examining life on estates.

3.13 This idea reflects Les Back's plea for a return to the 'art of listening' (2007) which advocates a shift away from simple critical observations, in this case of the working classes, and a return to a focus on listening, hearing and recording multiple, complex aspects of everyday life that 'aims to document and

understand social life without assassinating it' (p. 164). This argument has particular resonance when considering popular responses to the looting. Many commentators wrote gleefully about the looters' choice of consumer goods which appeared to reaffirm assumptions about 'chavvy' sportswear, mobile phones and jewelry and some focused on the fact that bookshops were left untouched, reporting a lack of interest in books and education even when free (for example in the *Evening Standard*, 19 September, 2011). Notably, shops containing goods with high resale potential were targeted and many of the offences following the looting were related to selling stolen goods.

3.14 Much of the representation and mediation of looting in August 2011 echoes earlier sociological accounts of middle class distancing and class disgust (for example, Lawler 2005; Skeggs 1997; Tyler 2008). This literature has recently been popularised by Owen Jones in his bestselling book *Chavs* which argues that the popular use of the word 'chav' has come to symbolise the demonising of the working classes and deep class hatred underpinning contemporary society (Jones 2011). In a BBC *Newsnight* debate following the riots, Jones responded to the historian David Starkey's assertion that the riots were triggered by a popularising of 'black culture' by arguing that Starkey's interchangeable use of race and class is illustrative of middle class disgust and social abjection of the working class.

3.15 The point I want to make here is that the public response to the looting was the focus on the particular choice of consumer goods and not only on the looting itself. This supports other recent research in the field of consumer culture which has argued that exclusion exists not simply in a lack of material ability to fully participate in consumer society but also in terms of representations of consumption that repeat and reproduce narratives of tasteless, deviant and dangerous consumers. For example, Steph Lawler has argued that the middle class holds dominance and ownership over what counts as 'tasteful' and concurrently, expressions of disgust over perceived violations of taste (2005). Imogen Tyler (2008) has similarly shown that 'chav' and its association with mockery, misrepresentation and the continual deriding of lifestyle, culture and where you live helps to reaffirm and reinforce class boundaries and dominant middle class identities.

3.16 I have argued elsewhere that in post-industrial Britain, consumption and the associated notion of cultural capital is one of the most potent signifiers of class and moreover, illuminates the real, physical and intimate experience of class (Casey 2010). The simultaneous availability and non-availability of consumption and goods with high cultural value offers an example of the real, physical, often painful and humiliating experience of class (see also Harvey et al. 2013 and McKenzie 2013). I argue that in a consumer society where we are defined by the goods that we consume, a lack of ability to participate and a feeling of ongoing exclusion from consumer society perpetuates feelings of anger, resentment and increased likelihood of taking up opportunities to loot.

3.17 Consumer society contradictorily offers a freedom to consume and express identity, value and status via consumer products whilst refusing access to consumption to many. The deep myth inherent in post-industrial societies is that consumer societies are free, fair and equal and that consumption is the price awarded to the most 'worthy' in terms of status, hard work and talent. Bourdieu's pioneering work *Distinction*, addresses this myth by demonstrating that status is acquired via the cultural formations of capital from which class identities are reproduced. Bourdieu recognises that exploitation has a material, objective reality but also that exploitation is concealed and realised via subjective conditions. In the following concluding section of this paper, I consider in more detail the extent to which these are conditions might be seen to be emotional rather than simply cultural responses.

From cultural to emotional capital

4.1 In this final section, I shift focus away from considering the cultural implications of the looting towards an account of looting as an emotional experience. Much of the language used by the looters themselves and also by those commenting on the looting was what might be termed 'emotional' language. The experience of participating and observing the looting also appeared to be highly charged emotional ones. I have suggested elsewhere that Bourdieu's classic cultural capital thesis might have a limited use for fully understanding 'dangerous' and 'deviant' forms of consumption (Casey 2008b) or consumption that might lead to social problems such as addiction or 'compulsive consumption' (Reith 2004). For Bourdieu, 'cultural capital' is a relational concept existing in conjunction with other forms of capital including social and economic (Bourdieu 1986). Social value and status are thus acquired and reproduced via cultural resources (see Reay 2000, for example). Other authors have recently added 'emotional capital' to Bourdieu's list of 'capitals'. 'Emotional capital' adds to the theoretical contribution of this paper by proposing that as a practice of investment in the self, related to pathologisation and exclusion, consumption is closely related to emotions. In particular emotional capital can be seen to facilitate actions and decision making (see Gillies 2006). Reay (2000) has also argued that emotional capital is a resource which is exchanged and 'passed on' via investment in and interaction with others and that poverty and exclusion arise from effective emotional capital 'techniques'.

4.2 In order to fully comprehend the intimate experiences of class, and in particular, the experiences of looting in August 2011, I draw on the concept of 'emotional capital' (see also Nowotny 1981 and Silva 2007). Rose has argued that far from being 'private' experiences, separate to the material and cultural power relations governing everyday life, emotions are both socially ordered and constructed (1990). For Rose, individuals continuously experiment with different techniques for managing the self and for 'living out' the everyday project of freedom. Consumption is one such practice of emotional investment in the self (see also Bauman 2011). From this perspective, the contradiction at the heart of consumer society – that of thrift and the work ethic versus an instant gratification culture – underpins the dilemma for contemporary consumers as they attempt to manage their feelings, personal beliefs and moral codes of behaviour alongside the lure of consumer goods. This dilemma is exacerbated for those who cannot easily participate in consumer society, and helps to understand the relationships between emotion and

looting in 2011. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) similarly highlight the neo-liberal myth of individuals being agents of their own success and 'failures' point to the contradictions inherent in the practice of self-reflexivity and the idea that self-transformation via consumption is possible. For the authors, reality TV 'makeover' shows offer one example of how bourgeois, normative notions (in this case of 'appropriate' middle class femininity) are presented as attainable via consumption. O'Donohoe and Turley (1999) have also examined the ways in which the desire for consumer goods is enhanced for individuals 'in crisis', for example for the unemployed and newly divorced, as individuals seek new ways of accruing value and enhancing self-esteem.

4.3 Williams et al. (2001) also identify the relationships between consumption, inclusion and exclusion and argue that as a creative pursuit, comprising pleasure, pain, taste and distaste, the exclusionary consequences of consumption are broadly emotional (2001: 218). Other authors have drawn attention to the connections that can usefully be forged between consumption and deep feelings of exclusion frequently associated with it. Pointing out that the language of exclusion is frequently discussed in terms of consumption 'success' and 'failure', the authors suggest that feelings particularly of guilt and anxiety are commonplace for those unable to fully participate in consumer society. Thus:

[P]overty and limited access to material resources can severely limit young people's opportunities to fully take up the identities potentially available to them – a form of exclusion that implicates the self concept as well as material or physical well-being. (Croghan et al. 2006: 474)

If consumption is central to the construction of identities where 'money, style and social worth are inextricably linked' (Croghan et al. 2006: 473), then it follows that an inability to consume is seen as a marker of lack of moral 'worth' and ability (Harvey et al. 2013).

Conclusion

5.1 I have argued in this paper that the consequences of exclusion are material, cultural and emotional. This is particularly true of looting in 2011 where much of the media analysis and commentary took the form of the two former but very little focused on the latter. In this paper I have argued that the experience of looting is a peculiarly emotional one. I suggest that in the UK with its dreary record on social mobility (see for example, Dorling 2012) for many, everyday life is characterised by repeated and constant attacks on dignity and that the exclusionary practices of consumption work to compound associated feelings and emotions of worthlessness. Importantly, the 2011 riots and the looting that followed have been differentiated from previous examples of unrest importantly because they were not seen as political protest. Instead, the events of August 2011 have been broadly presented as further evidence of a violent, 'mob-like' underclass lacking in taste and moral worth.

5.2 The real risk of this type of account is that nothing will be done and no lessons will be learned from the riots and the unprecedented looting that followed. After Brixton in 1981, Scarman reported on the racial disadvantage and discrimination inherent in British policing and other sections of society and various recommendations were made. Similarly after the riots in Meadowell in 1991, the Estate was regenerated. In short, it appeared that in previous riots lessons had been learned and that the rioters had at least to an extent been listened to. The difference in 2011 is the almost complete absence of sympathy for the rioters and looters which I argue was exacerbated by specific emotional responses of disgust, distaste and abjection towards the looters which reinforced commonly held views about a useless, tasteless underclass. Whilst it is true that many of the looters had little to lose, it is also true that observers of the riots had nothing to lose either simply by dismissing the looting as the actions of a 'chavvy', morally bankrupt underclass. By depersonalising and dehumanising looters in this way, the consequence of this was a political response that was overwhelmingly punitive and almost totally devoid of attempts to instill agency into the individuals who became involved in the looting. The obvious danger of this response is that without broader interventions, looting and other forms of 'dangerous consumption' might not become such rare events.

Notes

¹Mark Duggan was a young resident of Tottenham who was shot and killed by police on 4 August 2011. The resulting public protest at his death and the conflict that followed triggered the riots that followed.

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