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Cities of consumers: a reading of the 2011 English riots

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Abstract

This article analyses the urban-centred riots of August 2011 in England from the point of view of consumerism and city spaces. Asking what was motivational behind these historic – if little studied – riots, the paper is divided into two sections. The first section examines consumerism as a key concept, developing C. E. Griffin's work on youth cultures, to evidence a broader societal tension between a consumerist drive and material depravation among a depoliticised youth. A desire for goods that cannot be materialised is described as a phenomenon that is experienced spatially through urban areas in which the unattainable goods are contained. The second section considers David Harvey's view that the city itself, as a socialised space, is depoliticised in failing to inspire and structure a coordinated political movement during the riots. Analysing theories of city space in relation to a consumerist drive the article proposes that, even while young looters were not necessarily united around a political ideal that then fostered corresponding action, their looting communicates a pre-established pattern of consumption worthy of critical study. Through the development of these overlapping themes, it is intended that the context of rioting is attended to within wider patterns of consumerism in the urban locale. Reading this historical episode in a context of a global health pandemic helps prompt future discussion about how digitalised spaces rather than high streets might (re)direct a consumerist drive.

Key words: consumerism, youth marginality, urban poor, riots, space, city

1. Introduction

"It was like Christmas" (Lewis et al., 2011: 27), thus explains a sixteen-year old looter during the riots in England between the 6th and 9th of August 2011. The *Reading the Riots* report, jointly commissioned by the London School of Economics and *The Guardian* found that of the "2,278 commercial premises for which data was available" around "61% were retail premises selling electric goods" and a further "10% [were] shops selling clothing and sportswear" (Lewis et al., 2011: 28). In all "2,500 shops were looted" (Treadwell et al., 2013: 1). Painting the scenario, T. Slater details how "over 3000 people have been arrested, and 1715 people have been brought before the courts […] a majority of the 1715 are young (over half aged between 18 and 24), male (90%), with a previous caution/conviction (73%) […] in areas classified […] as 'multiply deprived'" (Slater 2011: 108).

While initial reports framed the chaos around a trigger moment with the "shooting of Mark Duggan, an alleged criminal, by Metropolitan police officers" (Treadwell et al., 2013: 1) on the 6th of August, this framing does not adequately narrate the events of the days that followed. This article considers the reported "struggle to articulate the 2011 riots" (Phillips et al., 2013: 5) and suggests how an understanding of youth-led urban marginality in British society might help better articulate this historic event.

The argument is structured around two key concepts: consumerism and city. The first section examines consumerism because the riots, according to G. Morrell et al. (2011: 31), were largely driven by the "attraction of getting a desirable object". Building upon C. E. Griffin's exploration of youth cultures and class it is asked whether "'consuming oneself into being' within the neoliberal social order […] places a particular burden on working class young people without access to the necessary financial resources to buy 'the right stuff'" (ibidem: 20).

The second section is a response to the first in arguing that contemporary British cities (in this case study specifically Birmingham) as the location of 2011's riots, did not facilitate a coordinated or collective effort that might be described as political in response to reported consumerist pressure and associated material deprivation. Developing D. Harvey's (2009: 324) view that the city is, at times, a dis-enabled and

unrealised "body politic", 2011's city riots provide a case study to assess his vision of the failed city.

2. Consuming Culture

2.1. Defining consumer culture

D. Moxon (2011: 2) posits consumer culture as "loosely defined as the desire and ability to live beyond basic needs", which is significant in the context of the 2011 riots. The National Centre for Social Research, an independent research body within the area of public policy, produced a research paper *The August riots in England: Understanding the involvement of young people*, in which a sample of people involved in the riots were interviewed. One of the motivations presented by the youth involved is that it was an "opportunity to get free stuff" especially high value items that "they would not otherwise be able to have" (Morrell et al., 2011: 31). Excitement around the possibility of obtaining desired objects that fall outside income brackets contrasts directly to another indicated factor in the riots where "[i]n some cases theft was motivated by a specific need, for example, stealing food, clothes for children" (ibidem: 32). It is here that an understanding of consumer culture arises. Consumer culture begins, in one sense, once "basic needs" (Moxon 2011: 2) have been met. The question is, though, how easy is it to define a need as basic.

D. Moxon (2011: 2) rightly argues that consumer culture and consumerism, interchangeable terms for him, are not "something novel and unique to our times". As characteristics and emphases change over time, critical attention becomes continually necessary. Consumption, rather than production, is now seen as "the defining characteristic of advanced western societies" (ibidem). S. Passini describes the activity of a consumer culture as an example of binging, whereby a drive to continually and habitually consume is created. Specifically, S. Passini (2013: 370) claims that:

> [w]ithin an economic perspective, consumerism refers to economic policies that place an emphasis on consumption and to the belief that free choice by consumers should dictate a society's economic structure. However, is this supposed freedom of choice real, or are people turned into slaves of consumption and therefore made less free? Indeed, the paradox is that consumerism is a culture of experimentation that – by urging the continuous purchase of the 'new' and dissatisfaction with the 'old', and by

changing so rapidly that the new is already old – leads to a culture of eternal dissatisfaction.

Product replacement shows how far consumer culture has removed the purchase and enjoyment of a product from the means of production itself. Z. Bauman (2001: 27) regards this urge to replace the old as leading to an "[u]ncertainty-generated anxiety" that has become the "very substance that makes the individualized society fertile for consumerist fears". Fear and anxiety with a thirst for product replacement begs another question: what happens when this drive remains unsatisfied?

2.2. Consuming designer goods or daily bread?

Examining literature surrounding the 2011 riots there is little evidence to suggest that looters were compensating for a lack of basic provisions. A recurring target appears to be high-end goods rather than basic necessities, indicating a drive beyond basic need. This is further evidenced since the tragic death of M. Duggan is not reported as a strong feature in rioters' narratives of their behaviour. As J. Treadwell et al. (2013: 11) indicate the "majority of the people we interviewed had never heard of Mark Duggan […] but they certainly knew about Prada and Rolex". The report continues "the initial trigger for the riots was unimportant" (ibidem: 7) and what ensued was not a call to arms but a call for "garms" (ibidem), the latter being a shortened term of reference for garments or clothing. J. Treadwell et al.'s (2013: 8) line of argument is striking because while there is the dominant claim that the riots represented a violent shopping spree, it was, in result, a failed riot "because there was no progressive political narrative to carry it further". Symbolically too, the use of looters as a collective noun attaches a code of meaning in relation to material goods and commercial value rather than class discontent.

The August riots makes a distinction in the classification of looters. Authors use the terms "opportunists" and "sellers" (Morrell et al., 2011: 27) to capture detail of the activity. Both terms relate the activities to the pursuit of goods. G. Morrell et al. (ibidem) explain how opportunists "talked about taking their chance to steal something they specifically wanted […] going to particular shops and trying things on be-

fore stealing them". These items were not, in all cases, expensive goods and were selected for direct personal usage. Sellers were also motivated towards goods but with the obvious intent to sell those goods: their motivation was not personal use. Sellers, in contrast to opportunists "took a more planned approach to their theft […] stealing as systematically and profitably as possible" (ibidem: 28). Referring to a systemised selection of goods, K. Cooper et al. (2015: 5) observe that "looting often involves a quite targeted form of consumption. That is to say, a pattern to the looting is often visible, with particular types of location, or particular goods, being the focus of the looters' attention". Whether an opportunist or a seller, the push to obtain goods for consumption was sufficient to warrant criminality.

2.3. Rioting caused by "disqualified consumers"

Without a collective narrative to carry the actions into coordinated political activity a narrative surrounding consumer goods emerges as this fieldwork observer notes: "[h]e says 'I've heard its going off down Corporation Street now so we are going to go and have a go at the Rolex place on New Street man, get some f*cking Rolex, get some f*cking Cartier" (Treadwell et al., 2013: 10). Rolex and Cartier, as brand names, are explicitly narrated as motivation for participation in the riots. Crucially, the naming of brands is linked inextricably to the names of Birmingham's streets, referring to Corporation Street and New Street, as though the city reads as the location of unobtainable goods.

Z. Bauman (2011) writes explicitly that the 2011 riots are "not hunger or bread riots. These are riots of defective and disqualified consumers". He details how individuals might fall into a trap of claiming a right to consume: a right that never can be fully enforced or lived out because as the right is enacted it self-perpetuates. They are "disqualified" (ibidem) because they are unable to sustain the demand consumerism has placed upon them. In such a context "non-shopping is the jarring and festering stigma of a life un-fulfilled – and of own nonentity and good-for-nothingness", which begins in youth where an income is unavailable (Bauman 2011). Z. Bauman's words help explain the lack of political unity or symbolism in the riots because it is ultimately about individuals experiencing the jar of "non-shopping" (ibidem). Hence,

it is not surprising that "[n]o outrage was directed towards corrupt elites" (Hall, Winlow, 2014: 111), and instead, as one of those involved states, fear of missing out developed:

> I don't want to be the one that misses out while every f*cker else is on it. […] I ain't got no real grievances or sh*t […]. It wasn't to bring down the f*cking government or reclaim the streets. […] I went to get me some of what I've seen others getting, because if I didn't, man, what would that make me? What else could you do? (Treadwell et al., 2013: 10).

Noticeably, the interviewee implicitly narrates a social anxiety that "non-shopping" creates (Bauman 2011) even without using the term: "I went to get me some of what I've seen others getting" (Treadwell et al., 2013: 10). Significantly, the interviewee records that seeing other people looting causes them to question "what that would make me [him/her]?" (ibidem). Non-participation in the riots, therefore, is equated to non-shopping in the logic of the 2011 riots. According to J. Treadwell et al., statements such as the one cited previously are important precisely in the absence of political coordinates. They propose that the riots "furnished depoliticized young people with an opportunity for the concentrated acting-out of these drives, giving free play to the underlying grab-what-you-can ethic that pervades Western consumer societies" (Treadwell et al., 2013: 10). Essentially, non-shopping becomes motivation for criminal shopping in the chaotic and disruptive form of riots.

There is an inherent contradiction. On the one hand, British society is presented as the epitome of a consumerist society. On the other hand, that same society is threatened by rampant consumerism the moment it is unleashed. D. Moxon (2011: 4) attempts to resolve the contradiction, preferring a "Janus-faced truth" that the riots disrupted social order while "simultaneously suggesting the strength and vitality of the consumer culture".

2.4. Consumerism in relation to youthfulness and globalism

C. E. Griffin presents a similar line of argument within the theme of youth cultures. She recognises the trap that a right to consume sets up for the individual whereby the right to consume is never satisfied. Neoliberal "discourses of individual

freedom, self-expression and authenticity demand that we live our lives as if this was part of a biographical project of self-realisation in a society in which we all have free choice to consume whatever we want" (Griffin 2011: 20–21). Frustration arises as consumption becomes constitutive of the person and when financial resources are limited.

Pressure increases among young people facing a wide sphere of influences in the meeting of the global and the local, without the income brackets to support the activity these influences might invite. For some young people the "'flows' of global capital can be enjoyed and embraced in ways that increase their repertoire of expressive youth cultures and styles. For others […] their relationship to global cultures may seem distant and remote" (Buckingham et al., 2015: 272). Some of the young participants in the riots communicate the link between the global and their individual actions. For instance, someone involved reports how "[t]hey put it on the news straight away. And basically, they just globalised it. […] And, by showing it global, it spreaded [*sic*] round the country" (Morrell et al., 2011: 35). Another individual links the televised, globalising, element specifically to their desire to loot, "I just went in. Then I saw it [the TV], everyone else was looking for TVs and so I said: I'm going to quietly take this one" (Morrell et al., 2011: 35).

Be it globally or locally transmitted, a tension exists between desire for goods and the (in)ability to obtain those goods. While outside of this paper's historical period insight from the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS), famously known as the Birmingham School, might prove useful. A. Cullis' *Telling Tales: A semio/graphy of Birmingham*, produced by the "Cultural Politics sub-group" (Cullis 1988: 1) details a struggle involving a "'non-legitimated' group" whose use of public space is perceived as disorderly, threatening "its legitimate users" (ibidem: 14-15). Describing "children and teenagers" gathered in Birmingham's Museum and Art Gallery and Bull Ring shopping centre, A. Cullis (1988: 15) muses upon a telling similarity in which:

> both situations involve the presentation of unattainable goods, consumption with the gaze, consumption without buying. School children and young people on the dole cannot afford to buy the things displayed […]. Both present the object as spectacle

alone; it has no exchange value for these groups. Saturday is whiled away 'window shopping', perhaps trying-on clothes but never buying; everyone knows that the objects in the museum are not for sale, only to be looked at (Cullis 1988: 15).

Within these lines Z. Bauman's (2011) "non-shopping" is anticipated through the practice of "consumption with the gaze" (Cullis 1988: 15). Even where the museum space is seemingly misused by "running about, talking or whispering loudly, touching things, staring ever-long at exhibits" (Cullis 1988: 16), this use is only perceived as misuse by "'legitimate' users" who are "in possession of cultural capital and symbolic wealth" (ibidem: 17). A connection is established between "unattainable goods" (ibidem: 15) and a youth that are depoliticised, characterised "as frivolous, trivial, meaningless, pathologically deranged, or hooligan" (Calluori 1985: 51).

3. The city as a locus of unfulfilled desire

3.1. How does space determine rioting?

Looting or rioting cannot occur in a vacuum. Part of the context that shapes the riots is the cities which contained them. Historically space has been viewed as an empty container within which things happen. As a case in point, A. Neal (2010: 28) remarks that space for E. Soja was "essentially neutral and unchanging, as a setting for power struggles rather than a component of such struggles". Within this context, space is "conceived as the opposite of time" and "defined negatively through a series of polarised binaries" (ibidem). If space is accepted as only where things happen, it has no value in and of itself. That the English riots took place in Nottingham, Birmingham, London, and so on, would have no meaning on one level: they could have happened anywhere.

In something of a spatial turn in social critical theory by 1985, J. Urry (1985: 21) asserted that "it is space rather than time which is the distinctively significant dimension of contemporary capitalism, both in terms of the most salient processes and in terms of a more general social consciousness". Space, finally, is recognised as part of the process and is given the qualities applied earlier to time. Famously, H. Lefebvre's (2010) text *The Production of Space*, as the title suggests, shows space to be socially produced and productive of social relations. He explains how:

[t]he state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces – but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements; so there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an a priori condition of these institutions and the state which presides over them (ibidem: 85).

H. Lefebvre is unequivocal that space exists through social relationships and interactions. His reference to "constituent institutions" (Lefebvre 2010: 85) brings the discussion explicitly to the city space because it is the principle location of such institutions as a hub of civic and social activity: it is the locus of concentrated power over which the state "presides" (ibidem). While D. Harvey also recognises the city as a current of capitalist relations and power dynamics, he regards the city as the environ of social change, at least potentially. He speaks of a "process of becoming through which people (and geographers) transform themselves through transforming both their natural and social milieus" (Harvey 2001: 115). D. Harvey's sense of "becoming" (ibidem) is echoed in S. Low's (2017: 30) view that space is "a condition or faculty, a capacity of social relationships: it is what people do, not what they are".

Recognising space as produced has exposed other dynamics. The becoming of some is more (spatially, regionally) limited than others, thus creating social tensions. As the *Reading the Riot* report documents, young rioters talked about "a pervasive sense of injustice. For some it was economic – the lack of a job, money, or opportunity. For others it was more broadly social" (Lewis et al., 2011: 24). S. Low (2017: 39) remarks that "[t]he spatial consequences of neoliberalism have been devastating to working-class communities and isolated the urban poor in deteriorating hyperghettos while at the same time protecting the middle and upper classes in citadels such as gated communities". In S. Low's reckoning, space has not only been shaped by social and economic forces: it has been designated by those forces.

Yet, for some critics, the riots in English cities were not protests against injustices. Rather, the riotous use of space served as a backdrop to a rush for designer objects in a maze of consumerism – a different kind of becoming beyond "basic needs" (Moxon 2011: 2). S. Hall and S. Winlow (2014: 107) contend that the:

riots occurred during a phase of advanced capitalist history in which the total lack of coherent class politics and alternative sources of identity has left the majority of

young people with no choice but to seek identity, status and respect by acquiring the post-social, post-political symbolism that has been attached to consumer objects by the marketing industry.

3.2. Looking to patterns of consumerism within city spaces

Writing in the aftermath of the 2011 riots D. Harvey laments England's offerings, deeming them paltry in comparison to global counterparts. He gives preference to "the various glimmers of hope and light around the world", including "the indignados movements in Spain and Greece, the revolutionary impulses in Latin America [and] the peasant movements in Asia" (Harvey 2013: 157). Further, D. Harvey praises locations that have been able to finally "see through the vast scam that a predatory and feral global capitalism has unleashed upon the world" (ibidem). To the English riots, alas, no such praise is rendered.

G. R. Millington finds D. Harvey's disappointment unfair. He criticises attempts to impose on a series of riots the expectation and language of political protest. In doing so, G. R. Millington (2016: 720) reminds his audience that riots are "by definition, improvised and chaotic. They do not present a 'finished thesis' and it is absurd to judge them in terms of political coherence". Instead, he sees in the 2011 riots an opportunity for rethinking expectations around urban resistance, and as a generational struggle, suggesting that it is not the case the rampant consumerism was displayed because of a failed political unity. Such a view misses the point. Yes, the riots were chaotic and un-coordinated. Yet, in their chaos there is also a criticism or reappraisal of consumer culture within the acts of looting.

For example, G. R. Millington remarks that many of the goods were stolen from retail shops that were already supported by looters. It was not that looters looted completely outside their usual economic range in terms of brand choice. Furthermore, G. R. Millington posits that "the retailers looted were almost without exception the same vendors that colonise the retail spaces of the urban poor: Foot Locker, Comet, Currys, Carphone Warehouse" (Millington 2016: 717). While not condoning illegal activity, it is essential that the particular choice and nature of the looting is analysed in order to understand something of the power dynamics at work.

As stated earlier, these are the standard retailers of choice outside of rioting and these large brand companies influence demand and are especially popular among younger city dwellers with middle to low income. In this way, the riots should open a different discussion to the one D. Harvey might have anticipated because the type of consumer relationships that were exposed through the riots is where a political unity or an "unifying political symbolism" (Hall, Winlow, 2014: 108) might be found. These looters looted within the familiar: they did not loot outside their economic norm and this is a significant element to observe.

Ultimately, G. R. Millington sees the riots as enabling rather than dis-enabling the city space as a locus for political activity. From G. R. Millington's perspective, critics must acknowledge the "ongoing politicization of unlikely spaces in the city beyond the traditional democratic centre, spaces such as Foot Locker, JD Sports and Carphone Warehouse. For young people in the margins of the city, these spaces are already political" (Millington 2016: 722). These shopping spaces have become politicised and are evidently used as reference points in the track of self-development and self-worth. As austerity increases and hits urban centres hardest in terms of employment and training opportunities, these margins will be continually stretched. G. R. Millington (ibidem) cites one of the rioters speaking into this context: "[t]hese f*cking shops, like, I've given them a hundred CVs […] not one job'".

3.3. Escaping political tropes in viewing urban communities and spaces

The city as a key for reading the 2011 riots necessitates an exploration of what R. Phillips et al. (2013: 4) define as "[i]magined geographies". For instance, they observe how geography is used to homogenise activity around the riots, presenting individual's characteristics as characteristics of an area. Discussions around the locations of riots rarely went beyond a "kind of grey, shabby, derelict, poverty-ridden fairytale-land" (ibidem), revealing a lack of will to challenge ignorance surrounding urban living. The 2011's events obliged people to look to these urban centres and perhaps reconsider their repeated narratives. Familiar tropes depicting the urban based youthful population that experience forms of depravation continued, nonetheless, because it is easier than having to engage with the communities themselves or

allowing a platform for their narratives. The contemporary Prime Minister D. Cameron's (2011) words, in his post-riot speech, epitomise such tropes:

> [y]et the truth is that for too long the big bossy bureaucratic state has drained it away. It's usurped local leadership with its endless Whitehall diktats. It's frustrated local organisers with its rules and regulations. And it's denied local people any real kind of say over what goes on where they live. Is it any wonder that many people don't feel they have a stake in their community? This has got to change. And we're already taking steps to change it. That's why we want executive Mayors in our twelve biggest cities because strong civic leadership can make a real difference in creating that sense of belonging. We're training an army of community organisers to work in our most deprived neighbourhood because we're serious about encouraging social action and giving people a real chance to improve the community in which they live.

Although D. Cameron (2011) implies that he wants to make a "real difference in creating that sense of belonging", he continually uses the first person plural "we", seeking to confer his ideal of "belonging": "we're training an army […] /we're serious about encouraging" (ibidem). Continually, D. Cameron uses the verb "giving" directly in relation to the urban poor. He promises that a "we" will give "people a real chance to improve the community in which they live" (ibidem). The premise is that people living in those communities are only capable of creating the community they would want with the approval of others. D. Cameron patterns his speech around a return to local powers and local politics, but ultimately the local hands of governing are guided by the hand of central government. Contained within D. Cameron's speech is the kind of "[i]magined geographies" R. Phillips et al. (2013: 4) seek to expose where an impression of the city is imposed from without rather than created from within.

4. Conclusions

This paper began with a bizarre Christmas-like scene in a rioter's room filled with looted goods from a popular high street store and it ended with a former British Prime Minister speaking promises over the heads of those to whom promises were

made. The sheer damage to retail properties in those August days in 2011 cannot be denied. This was not about consumer choice: it was criminal activity.

Adding the burden of consumption to situations of structural depravity is not an attempt to justify the violence and damage of those August days. Indeed, the article has not indicated that there is a single frame to the whole narrative: riots are complex. To some extent, I share D. Harvey's (2009: 324) general frustration that the city was unable to coordinate as a "collective" and suggest that in those August days we witnessed a mass of, largely youthful, individuals living beyond "basic needs" (Moxon 2011: 2). Z. Bauman's (2011) "disqualified consumers" did not demonstrate an obviously political manoeuvre. There was no well-defined dialectic or a reach for political unity according to traditional notions of political association. What emerged, instead, was a raw version of consumer culture, exposed at the heart of urban marginalities, where people behaved individually rather than collectively. Reading these riots in our own times, as Covid-19 has forcibly changed the location of consumption predominantly to the online sphere, where and how will these continuing tensions and dynamics emerge?

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