



## Veblen in the (Inner) City: On the Normality of Looting

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### Abstract

Drawing on Veblen's concept of 'pecuniary prowess' I will argue that the August riots can be understood not so much in terms of protest but as an appropriation of the underlying acquisitive logic of capitalism. The violent realisation of that logic across class divides has become more likely due to an erosion in plausibility of discourses of meritocratic legitimacy. Recent denigrating discourses around "chavs" as dangerous and undeserving poor can be understood as attempts to reinstate meritocratic legitimacy rhetorically, but in an increasingly unequal society this becomes an ever more difficult enterprise. On the other hand, the assertion of the order of property through an effective police response may have eased the pressure by providing evidence that anxieties about a full scale insurgence are unfounded.

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**Keywords: August 2011 Riots; Thorstein Veblen; Inequality; Capitalism; Violence**

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### Introduction

**1.1** The most common reaction to the English Riots has been to understand them as symptoms of some crisis or social pathology that has been developing over the last decade or two. It has been suggested that they are the expression of consumerism gone mad (e.g. by Zygmunt Bauman 2011 – or by the Guardian's Zoë Williams), the loss of a realistic alternative to capitalism (Slavoj Žižek 2011), or the 'breakdown of traditional structures of support' in 'dysfunctional communities' leading to a 'distorted morality' (Iain Duncan Smith 2011). Drawing on Thorstein Veblen's 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen 1994) I will suggest that if the Riots were a symptom of anything at all they were a symptom of the inherent violence of the capitalist order of property. They may constitute a Durkheimian *anomie* but not an *anomaly*. The 'distorted morality' Iain Duncan Smith bemoans is one that is in the DNA of capitalism. The oft-invoked logic of work and equal exchange at the heart of capitalist legitimacy has an ugly twin, the logic of violence and intimidation: the latent aggression of appropriation, of taking without giving, a sense of entitlement to that which one can lay one's hands on. Marx (1962: 741ff.) called it the 'original accumulation of capital', the initial expropriation of land and livelihoods which, as Rosa Luxemburg (1963) has pointed out – has never stopped since.

**1.2** Thorstein Veblen (1994), best known for his notions of 'conspicuous consumption' and 'emulation', called this ruthlessly acquisitive aspect of capitalism 'pecuniary prowess' – a social character trait which he ascribed to both the upper classes (in his terminology the 'leisure class' and the 'business class') and what he called the 'delinquent class'. It was, of course, the latter that ran wild last August – and it is neither a large class, nor one that is a vanguard of "the underclass" (as implied by e.g. by Mary Ridell 2011 in the *Daily Telegraph* on 8<sup>th</sup> August). Owen Jones (2011) points out that deviant behaviour in working class people tends to be taken as an indicator for the moral deprivation of their communities, while the same is not the case for the misbehaviour of middle and upper class people. It is therefore unusual for a government minister like Iain Duncan Smith (2011) to make the connection between the moral outlook of the looters and that of those at 'the very top', manifested in 'the banking crisis, phone hacking or the MPs' expenses scandal'. But he is mistaken to imply that we are witnessing the all-out *decay* of a bygone harmony of respectable citizens – workers, shop keepers and industrialists – infused with Protestant family values and work ethics. It is safe to say that over the last centuries neither London's corporate leaders nor London's gangsters and petty criminals ever suffered from a lack of pecuniary prowess. (McDonald 2010)

**1.3** According to Veblen this is all part of a continued dominance of barbarism in which ever since the

Neolithic Revolution property and domination have been distributed according to the superior ability to violence and intimidation. Capitalism for him was just a new form of feudalism in which those on the top, the leisure and business classes, demonstrate and validate their position through the display of excessive luxury. By doing so they publicly waste the product of others' work. It is the fact that they go unchallenged that affirms their authority over those who work. It proves that they are worth it – by divine grace or an equivalent that granted them success in appropriation of resources and power. Not surprisingly, the consumption practices of the propertied classes often make barely masked reference to violence: from a predilection for blood sports to the superior lethality of the Four by Four.

**1.4** Veblen is mainly read as the theorist of emulation – the idea being that the lower classes ape the consumptive habits of "their betters" in an attempt to climb the up in the social hierarchy. It is this element of his theory that is regurgitated again and again when accounting for the mass theft of branded goods – as the *Evening Standard* explains on 12<sup>th</sup> August:

The rioters may have felt themselves to be dispossessed and excluded but they were none of them pillaging from any necessity. They were not hungry, they were not cold. What they were after was high-status, desirably branded consumer goods. Flash trainers and fashionable clothes. Smartphones and touchpads. Flat-screen TVs and gaming stations. Expensive bikes. None of them essential to life. (Sexton 2011)

People were going for status goods. But this part of the *Theory of the Leisure Class* is also the most contested as there is not that much evidence of emulation across class divides. Ever since the mods, working-class youth cultures have pursued distinct styles, not upper class imitations (e.g. Hewitt 2003).

**1.5** According to the logic of Veblen's own argument, namely that what is displayed is not just a sign but *evidence* of pecuniary prowess through waste of *actual wealth*, imitation of status symbols would be hopeless anyway. One can never catch up with those who have more spending power. The only plausible option for betterment is emulation not of aesthetic patterns but of the mode of acquisition itself: pecuniary prowess – violence. The crucial characteristic of conspicuous consumption is that it is conspicuous *waste* – waste of others' time and work as evidence not just of "position" but outright domination already in the act of consumption (Varul 2006). Through a Veblenian lens the gangsters leading the looting are truly *aristocratic* in attitude: they emulate the robber barons from which the European nobility descend. They enact the appropriative violence that capitalism has inherited from its 'barbaric' predecessors. What the looters did indeed is in utter contempt for "productive employment". They went for over-priced branded goods that stand for leisure and luxury. Through brands they acquire symbols of (corporate) power. As W. F. Haug (1986) suggested in his *Critique of the Commodity Aesthetics*, through brands we ally ourselves with the power of capital itself. The looters, unable or unwilling, to strive for tokens of meritocratic recognition through education and work, went for the symbols of precisely what they were doing: appropriation and exploitation.

**1.6** But capitalism is not unambiguously an order of covert violence – and that is why there can be a moral debate about the state of British society rather than just a quelling of insolence, putting people back in their place. Nested within the framework of property relations that are guaranteed by the state monopoly on violence, a new legitimacy of property began to flourish with the emergence of a bourgeois society – a legitimacy founded on work and equal exchange. It is this legitimacy that the condemnation of the looters rests on, the notion that if you want something you don't just take it, but you work and exchange it for the work of others. In Veblenian terms this is the meritocratic ethos of the 'industrial classes'. Again, this legitimacy finds expression in practices of consumption. Wealth here represents (among other things) productivity and social utility, and meritocratic middle classes enact such virtue through, for example, healthy eating or educational consumption such as reading or culture tourism. The middle-class nature of Zoë Williams' sneer on the rioters could not be more pointed than in her observation that Waterstone's was left untouched. Feigning amusement she overplays a deep seated fear: The cultural tokens of meritocratic status have no currency with the underclass. In the end the position of the meritocratic middle class depends on the same last resort to violence as that of the acquisitive upper class – but in contrast to the latter it is *borrowed* military might. Normally those fears are dealt with by keeping those who could pose a threat 'out of sight of the middle-class majority', as Iain Duncan Smith points out. The August unrests were a stark reminder that the essentially peaceful principle of work and exchange relies on violence and intimidation to protect the resulting unequal property relations.

**1.7** The anxiety around a potential uprising of the "chavs" (see Jones 2001 for the denigrating nature of this term) is not founded in any actual tendency towards rioting and ransacking. Rather, it is the bad conscience about inequality that fuels the fear of the revenge of the expropriated that has been troubling the middle classes ever since the times of Rousseau – not just in view of realistic threats as those once posed by Communism and de-colonisation, but because of the moral plausibility of such revenge. Without military capacity they entirely rely on the notions of work and trade, strong ideological commitments and appeasement through the welfare state, knowing that, as Rousseau (1950: 250) observed: 'if others took from them by force what they themselves had gained by force, they would have no reason to complain.' The denial of violence in property and promotion of meritocratic legends thus are of vital importance.

**1.8** But in a non-egalitarian society the violence at the basis of property relations can never be entirely forgotten. Pnina Werbner (1996), taking up Veblenian themes, shows that what Bourdieu called 'symbolic violence' is central at the consumerist celebration of love that is Christmas. The unequal world of commodities breeds resentment. As Detlev Claussen (1994: 48) puts it, in commercial exchange the commodity owner is not only confronted with goods but also with the social prohibition violence and the violation of their sovereignty that this taboo entails. Abhorrence of violence – and in particular of lethal force – is deeply inscribed in consumerist mentality and its enactment safely contained in daydreams that come with an index of reversibility (Varul 2008). But under a social order that preserves the exploits of past

and distant acts of violence and allows them to continue to be the bedrock of growing inequalities, it will continue to loom under the surface and regularly break out.

**1.9** In fact, the few meritocratic opportunities open to the working classes and limits to exploitation are, paradoxically, largely owed to tactics of intimidation. Veblen pointed out the irony that the recognition of labour, the principle of "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work" (as the old slogan goes – cf. Engels 1989 for a critical reflection), was achieved by the opposite of work: militancy, strikes and the implicit or open threat of rebellion. Until today, the recognition of *work* is expressed in the logic of the *leisure* class: through participation in conspicuous consumption, through paid holidays, and through an entitlement to pensioned retirement. From the early days of Blackpool frivolity to present day concerns about weekend binge drinking, middle class observers have, one may say "instinctively", looked at working class leisure as an aggression that needs to be contained and transformed into more meaningful behaviour – "meaningful" normally referring to the reproduction of labour power (cf. Cross 1993).

**1.10** The Riots are a reminder that the honour of labour is secondary to that of force, coming at a time when the legitimacy of acquisitive capitalism is at its lowest. They accelerated and reinforced the ideological mood swing from the legitimization of capitalism as promise of absolute wealth (Deutschmann 2001) to capitalism as a promise of reward for work and effort. While Labour under Ed Miliband (2011) have made a problematic Veblenian turn in pitching producing capital against grabbing capital (ignoring, as did already Veblen, that they are two sides of the same coin – see Adorno 1941), the Government's focus is firmly on the moral state of the, in the words of Justice Minister Kenneth Clarke, 'feral underclass' (Bowers 2011). This is a textbook example for a Freudian projection – unreciprocated acquisition and not even looting are not the sole prerogative of the "underclass": Those illegally disembowelling the containers washed ashore on Branscombe Beach in 2007 were as respectable as the few suspected middle-class rioters presented by the press as the odd ones out in the August 2011 events. Themselves not immune from the impulse to grab and run, the respectable people need reassurance that it is the rabble who are greedy, uncontrolled and violent. This has been played out on a symbolic level on the back of working class celebrities. Tyler and Bennett (2010) have argued that the main function of 'chav celebrities' is to deliver a negative foil against which positive middle class identity (and middle class femininity) can be played out. Cross and Littler (2010) diagnose a neoliberal *Schadenfreude* served by celebrity downfall, reinforcing the meritocratic self-image of the middle classes by putting the undeserving upstarts back in their place.

**1.11** But meritocracy is *old* liberalism (dating back to Locke and Adam Smith) while the *Schadenfreude* analysed by Cross and Littler or the denigration attested by Tyler and Bennett (2010) are expressions of discontent with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has discarded the idea of meritocracy decades ago – culturally through the celebration of unmitigated greed in the Thatcher years, and academically in the writings of Milton Friedman (1962), Friedrich Hayek (1976) and Robert Nozick (1980). Friedman (1962: 161) downgraded the semi-meritocratic principle 'To each according to what he and the instruments he owns produces' to an accidental outcome of a liberal market. Hayek and Nozick saw it as dangerous nonsense. As long as everyone is better off in a radically free market capitalist society, for Hayek inequality does not matter. And for Nozick even such a consideration for general welfare is an immoral attack on the natural right to property. The only merit that remained to be rewarded was the ability to accumulate itself - pure pecuniary prowess.

**1.12** But while meritocratic principles do not apply at all at the very top of the social hierarchy, the abandoning of meritocratic pretence at the bottom and the ascendancy of seemingly unashamed "chav" celebrities were a cause of concern. The extension of a neoliberal mentality to those below the property ladder seemed to pose a threat – a harbinger of a descent into chaos.

**1.13** From there a moral case was quickly built – like the 'chav' celebrities the looters are undeserving and, as Zoë Williams complains, not even properly poor; they don't go for bread and milk. This compares unfavourably with the poor in the Third World – presented in fairtrade marketing as impoverished but friendly ascetic workaholics – whom conscientious middle class consumers support and against whom the British underclass is measured (Raisborough/Adams 2009). In such invidiously comparative denigration fears of the allegedly overfed (obese), lazy and violent domestic poor surface (Varul 2011). And with social mobility on merit not being a generally plausible option, for working class youths playing to such fears can indeed be an attractive way of asserting themselves. Fear at least imparts respect of a vague sense of physical superiority. The dread that the figure of "the chav" commands constitutes an experience of recognition that is not available in spheres of humiliation such as the classroom or the low-pay workplace. While Tyler and Bennett suggest that 'chav celebrity' is promoted as confirmation of middle class values *ex negativo*, the condemnation they receive makes them attractive to those collectively denigrated. It has been often said that celebrities incorporate power (e.g. Marshall 1997), but the power is that of those they, in more than one way, represent. Standing out for them (and thus standing up for them), they posed the threat of a general uprising of the underclass as which the Riots have been commonly misinterpreted (especially in the first days).

**1.14** And this could be one of the more paradox outcomes of the Riots: The bluff is drawn. Although the effects were dramatic and tragic, the actual number of rioters was relatively low (insignificant even, if compared with the number of people drawn to recent demonstrations). Žižek (and Badiou) made a lot of the absence of a system alternative after the fall of the Soviet Union: However bad that alternative may have been, it has kept Capitalism under pressure not to show its most ugly face. One could say that – in memory of the riots of the 1980s or similar events in the French *banlieues* – the menace of rioting mobs in the inner cities used to have a similar effect. But the swift collapse of this "uprising" once the police were out in numbers shows that there is not much to fear from "the underclass". Social inequality can be, for the moment, safely ignored.

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