# Communities, Centres, Connections, Disconnections: Some Reflections on the Riots in Birmingham

by Gargi Bhattacharyya, James Cowles, Steve Garner and Ajmal Hussain
Aston University in Birmingham

## Abstract

This paper presents key ideas from fieldwork conducted in Birmingham between 2009 and 2011. This work examined identity in 'white' neighbourhoods, and attitudes to politics and understandings of poverty in more mixed ones. This work revealed that many Birmingham residents were concerned about a perceived loss of values, the impact of 'unrespectable' households and individuals in their areas and the apparent disconnect between political representatives and local residents. In the aftermath of the disturbances of August 2011 across England, including in Birmingham, we revisit these themes and examine the implications for understanding disorder in the city of Birmingham.

## Introduction

**1.1** The disturbances across English cities and towns in summer 2011 have elicited a storm of popular commentary, including expressions of surprise and shock. Since 2009, we have been researching the views of residents in low-income neighbourhoods of Birmingham – with particular attention to identity in 'white' neighbourhoods, attitudes to politics and understandings of poverty[1] – and, perhaps predictably for sociological research, our findings suggest that 'the riots' may be both less sudden and unexpected, and also more complicated and uneven, than suggested by some of the most immediate popular responses.

**1.2** The contention, often repeated by the political class in recent months, that we are living through a loss of shared values, and that this results in a decline in behaviour, was echoed in our work with Birmingham residents. In this paper we will demonstrate how much of what people said to us could appear to vindicate a Cameronesque account of 'broken Britain'. However the 'art of listening' demands a creative and critical attention to the stories that people tell about themselves, others and the places that they live (Back 2007). Such statements must be seen in the context of the city as a whole, and the various challenges facing low-income households in Birmingham and across Britain. It will, therefore, look beyond these notions of a decline in respectability and consider how peoples' connections to their neighbourthoods, 'others' and institutions of the city, combine to shape a particular sense of what it means to be part of a city, and what it means to participate in the life of that city, including during less orderly times.

## Local values

**2.1** Our recent research sought to identify the nature of and relationships between white identities, poverty and political disengagement in some of the most deprived outer wards of Birmingham. A key finding to emerge, and one that provoked much anxiety and concern throughout all research areas was a reported loss of a shared value system, both locally and further afield.

**2.2** A shared value system was seen as a tool that encouraged cohesiveness and solidarity against collective conditions of social and economic hardship. Many respondents recalled an era when 'standards' were set and maintained by the community, via cultural norms; when neighbours would expect each other to live in a certain way and according to mutually understood values. These standards of behaviour were seen to be maintained via more official channels, the local council providing regulation and routine inspections, further encouraging people to live in a certain way – a reassertion of the belief that public institutions used to 'work' in the past, but not any longer .

**2.3** However our research consistently unearthed the narrative that respondents have witnessed a shift in

values over time.

> 'The streets are not swept. They're not tidy. People just throw things down now. It's just the way they are now. Unless its me... I don't know? I was taught never to throw things on the floor.' (Male, 70's – outer-city 'white' neighbourhood)

**2.4** The decline in the physical appearance of a place in both public and private spaces was an oft-cited symptom of a change to the traditional code of respectability. Other signals were identified as the general absence of a work ethic throughout an area with high dependency on benefits, 'problem families', disruptive or threatening behaviour, drug dealing and drug use and general low level as well as more serious crime.

**2.5** Much of the blame for the above was aimed at 'kids' in the area. The kids were identified as operating from a different set of values to the mainstream. The implications of this for many respondents over the age of 30 included a diminished sense of personal safety, concerns over safety for loved ones, a longing for the past and anxieties over the future for their area as well as feelings that the area was no longer suitable for them.

> 'When I lived here I let my children out a couple of times and I've seen them getting into things that they wasn't exposed to before [...] I'd ban my children from going out. (Female 20s, outer-city 'white' area)

**2.6** Many of the respondents struggled with whether this was a political/structural concern, neglect at the community level or a lack of personal responsibility. However, what they did believe was that this was an issue affecting communities everywhere and not just in their area.

**2.7** However critical analysis established that this shift in social conditions was not the only thing that shaped the view of their area. Regardless of these changes, a strong affiliation to their local area existed. In many cases, residents' life worlds were being played out on just a few roads. This localism was supported by the workings of local government and statutory agencies, for which interventions that were locally specific in their content and delivery represented a rational way of allocating resources against perceived needs. This is particularly apparent in the way special funding programmes were administered in different parts of the city.

## Politics, money and space

**3.1** Most deprived parts of Birmingham have been targeted with special funding programmes, yet people, often including beneficiaries of funding, were increasingly questioning of the outcomes that resulted. Spaces such as 'Squirrel Haven'[2] in an outer-city area -an attempt to create a safe public space for young people at risk of involvement in crime– became the site of small political battles between local politicians and allied groups each seeking to assert their claim in its evolution. Longer standing community groups in the area chided such politicking, suggesting their community was being narrowed to a single issue such as crime and that the 'bigger picture' was being lost. The narrow focus of Squirrel Haven, like numerous other 'local' initiatives across deprived wards, meant places like this failed to connect with the wider city; except on paper, as part of citywide 'targets' and 'outcomes'. The search for quick fixes and the resultant sense of pride and deservingness of the local 'community' and politicians furthers the sense of disconnection between deprived areas and the rest of the city. Political imagination is confined to the most micro of local concerns. In this sense Birmingham may appear vulnerable to the possibility of tensions between areas, with residential areas marked as 'belonging' to particular communities, although these are probably better understood as engendered by the workings of government, business and politics than communal rivalries.

**3.2** Another consequence of the way anti-deprivation initiatives are conceived and delivered in wards across Birmingham is the way individuals and groups targeted by them engage in the life of the city beyond their own localities. Take, for example, the citywide priority of tackling worklessness that has spawned networks of public, private and third-sector agencies, and delivery plans that target particular categories such as lone parents, the unskilled and long term unemployed. Despite this vast effort, respondents talked about low-skilled employment in their localities as the only opportunities open to them. More rewarding or lucrative employment was to be found in other parts of the city, particularly the expanding city centre. These opportunities were seen as inaccessible to people without the required skills, or too expensive and difficult to travel to on a daily basis – and the highly territorialised divisions of the city added to people's reluctance to stray too far from home. This limited people's experiences of the city, others and their perceptions of both of these. Opportunities seemed to lie beyond people's own localities, and people questioned why more was not done to connect them and their localities to the wider life of the city. In this context, areas like the city centre - bustling with economic activity, different people and public life - was cast as overdeveloped, becoming the site of simultaneous lament and desire.

**3.3** These sentiments underlay the extreme distrust and dissatisfaction that respondents exhibited towards official institutions and political representatives. There was a belief that their areas fared less well when it came to prioritising city development. Spending on the city centre guaranteed better returns, it was perceived, because it represented what outsiders such as investors and visitors wanted to see. Yet when special programme funding finally made its way to deprived areas, particularly outlying wards, initiatives tended to be top-down rather than engaging with local concerns. People feeling that things were 'done to them' was therefore a common theme, and this confirmed the more general belief that political representatives were out for themselves and disengaged from local residents. However, despite this, residents continued to engage in 'formal' political structures, such as ward meetings. We found a strong sense of attachment to local neighbourhoods, as well as constant concerns about the effect centrally

made decisions might have on the quality of life there.

**3.4** Despite the narrow and shrinking sense of community taking hold in the neighbourhoods we researched - not least because of the workings of local politics and city planners - people in outlying areas still regarded the city centre as an important part of their day to day lives. This attachment varied across groups based on their length of residency, distance from and ease of access to the city. For older generations in Handsworth and Quinton there still were a few locations on the high street and the flea markets that were recognizable and, therefore, able to be negotiated - although new bus routes prompted by new road layouts in turn prompted by new building developments were slowly deterring them from visiting. For newcomers, the city centre enabled connections even if it was only to change a bus, while for young people it was a space of simultaneous consumption, leisure, entertainment and study (two of Birmingham's largest Further Education providers have their main campuses in the city centre as well as two local universities. So, the city centre retains a diminishing role for some and an increasing role for others, a by-product of the recent - in some cases award winning- development that has taken place in Birmingham city centre.

**Whose City?**

**4.1** Birmingham city centre has had a well-documented facelift in the last decade, but critics argue that this is classic 'Central Business District' (CBD) strategy, deployed in a number of cities with little evidence of improving inclusion or increasing employment outside of the centre (Barber and Hall, 2008). In other words, very few of the material benefits engendered accrue to the outer city, nor do the showpiece buildings attract outer-city Brummies in great numbers (at least people over 30 years old, while younger ones regularly visit the centre to hang out, shop, or attend colleges).

**4.2** Aversion and indifference to the city centre were certainly prevalent responses in our interviews. While some saw the city centre as an unfamiliar and dangerous space where crime happens, older people felt the layout was too challenging, while others simply saw nothing to draw them in. There are also strands of racialisation in white people's accounts of feeling insecure in this space. While younger people focus on the Bullring shopping centre and central outdoor space, they are not consumers of the arts or dining opportunities offered in Birmingham's central redevelopment zones.

**4.3** In our work, emotional attachment to the city centre was virtually zero. It was at best an instrumental relationship. The centre was seen as not belonging to anyone. Contrasted with the intensely detailed social maps of the outskirts, the city centre was described as almost a blank space. It is not surprising then that this represents an undefended and indefensible space, only for consumption and hanging out rather than living and emotional investment. It is a place where no-one lives, where no-one really belongs, and therefore no-one can be in the wrong place. This is a key point for more disadvantaged young people, whose mobility is impeded by the fear of trespassing into someone else's territory (Kintrea et al., 2008) with dangerous results. Instead, the city is a work and leisure space containing a number of large ostensibly public buildings that have relatively small footfalls such as the International Convention Centre, the library, the Symphony Hall, etc. Indeed, while small-scale defence of local neighbourhood territory was evident in August 2011, it took the march of the English Defence League in August 2009 to bring large numbers of people onto the streets to 'defend' the city centre itself. If we follow the accounts of our respondents, the riots confirm young people's disengagement with the city centre as a *place of belonging* and showed their engagement with it as a place 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. The centre's corporate anonymity thus places it outside the imaginary 'Birmingham' of the outer Brummies' lifeworlds – or, at least, the imaginaries of not-young neighbourhood Birmingham.

**4.4** Unlike some areas of London, the majority of damage in Birmingham was confined to the city centre – an area with few independent retailers or sense of local ties. The much-discussed disturbances on the Soho Road in Handsworth (a neighbourhood deemed 'inner-city' in British parlance, but distinctly separate from the 'city centre' and with a decades-long association with Asian, African-Caribbean and, increasingly, other migrant communities) appeared to result in limited damage to local small traders, although the local police station was burnt out. There was significant mobilisation in local neighbourhoods against the threat of possible damage to property, and highly visible street presences of predominantly Asian men in areas such as Handsworth, Witton and Winson Green, where local small businesses are associated, although not exclusively, with South Asian communities. Yet the numbers of young men present far exceeded the numbers of businesses in the area, so it is implausible to mark all participants as 'defending their property'. However, it is also worth noting that these neighbourhoods remain densely populated low-income areas, and, in our research, residents in similar neighbourhoods expressed a strong affiliation to their local area and a weak sense of attachment to the city as a abstract whole.

**4.5** Meetings since the events of the summer confirm that local traders and residents are aggrieved about the perceived lack of response and protection from police – and the particularities of local political manoeuvring have led to a number of 'consultations' in neighbourhoods but little apparent discussion of the place of the city centre in Birmingham's political imagination. It has been left to Birmingham Chamber of Commerce to 'represent' the views and interests of this space in terms of the loss to the local economy (Birmingham Chamber of Commerce 2011). This split between the voices of local traders and residents, presented as closely tied to their own neighbourhood, and the intervention of the Chamber on behalf of the abstraction of the 'local economy' confirms existing divisions between the sense that the city centre is a space of faceless and privatised corporate interests, offering branded experiences to those who can afford them, and that 'lived Birmingham' consists of a series of areas with very local ties between traders, residents and the micro-neighbourhood.

**4.6** Others have noted the extreme localism of Birmingham politics (Back and Solomos 1995). Our research confirmed that residents distrusted political representatives and felt that initiatives in their localities were used for short-term political gains. The rush to rewrite the disturbances as a matter of neighbourhood consultation – and the need for neighbourhood-based retail regeneration, including in areas untouched by the events of the summer – reflects this territorial competition. The city centre, paradoxically, falls out of this ongoing battle for position between representatives and 'their' neighbourhoods'. In an echo of the extreme localism expressed by Birmingham residents, Birmingham political life also plays out power struggles between and within parties through competition over local initiatives.

**4.7** The disturbances in Birmingham hit city centre businesses – some the predictable phone and sportswear shops, some independent retailers – and required some minimal co-ordination, if only to get into the town centre. People did not 'riot' on their own doorsteps. Self-styled 'respectable' citizens anticipated the official denouncement of the feral, broken and/or sick among us, but rioters did not focus activity on their own neighbourhoods. Whether this indicates a kind of 'respect' for local residential spaces or a disconnection from the city centre or a pull towards the usually inaccessible consumer city is unclear. Birmingham residents of varying ages and ethnicities believe that there is an unruly and disconnected minority among their neighbours who bring down areas and have questionable values – but no-one we met claimed this identity as their own.

## Conclusion

**5.1** Our research sought to uncover voices that are sometimes unheard in Birmingham – but, of course, even these often marginalised voices can play on dominant narratives of otherness, can reveal particular local structures of exclusion and inclusion, can be outright fantastical in some of their claims. When residents tell us their beliefs about other areas or other kinds of people, we have tried to listen for what this tells us about their own sense of identity, safety and connectedness. The challenge is to give due weight to these utterances – but to resist the silencing of other absent voices. For Birmingham residents who are not young and who feel distanced from the larger city, the events of the summer might seem to confirm their beliefs about where disorder and danger lie – and the cross-party political discourse of sickness and brokenness appeals to this sensibility. Perhaps this shared narrative, even if fictional, can serve as a means of reconnecting local political representatives and local residents in some parts of the city – and that seems to have been the intention behind the variety of consultation processes that have arisen in local neighbourhoods. The cost of such renewed dialogue has been the demonisation and silencing of some other group – whether the feral, the unrespectable or the inadequately socialised young. Versions of such characters and their supposedly detrimental impact were identified throughout our research and the apparent confirmation of such beliefs from official sources may convince some that, at last, they are being heard. Our work indicated an urgent need to create some arena and means by which residents could feel that political representatives and official bodies recognised shared concerns in a manner that was not transformed immediately into electioneering material. Responses to the 'riots' may offer such an opportunity – and, certainly, the chance to hold public bodies to account in relation to perceived inaction and indifference to the security and concerns of people and property in lower-income areas has been important.

**5.2** The voices of the unrespectable, however, along with those of participants in the disturbances, remain absent from these interchanges. Our research revealed that, for many Birmingham residents, the possibility of imminent disruption and violence was seen as ongoing. The riots confirmed their view that things could not carry on like this without something kicking off. Although our respondents did not fit the profile of 'rioters', ironically, the riots have given a sense that their point of view has been heard. Perhaps they are right, and disorder is always around the corner.

**5.3** Our work revealed that, for many, city life feels fragile and unstable, with people clinging to the most local of ties as ballast. For them, riots are no surprise. Understanding why they happened here and now, however, requires another kind of conversation with a different group of people.

---

## Notes

[1] This paper draws on research funded by the Equalities Division of Birmingham City Council.

[2] The reference here to a particular space has been changed to ensure anonymity of the initiative, and groups/individuals associated with it.

---

## References

BACK, Les (2007) The Art of Listening, Oxford and New York, Berg.

BACK, Les; Solomos, John (1995) Race, Politics and Social Change, London and New York, Routledge.

BARBER, A. and Hall, S. (2008) 'Birmingham: whose urban renaissance? Regeneration as a response to economic restructuring',*Policy Studies* 29(3): 281-292.

BIRMNGHAM CHAMBER OF COMMERCE (2011) '£7 million – the cost of riots to Birmingham business', 10/8/2011: <http://www.birminghamchambergroup.com/Influencing-Government/Media/Riots-11-8-11.aspx>.

KINTREA, K., Bannister, J., Pickering, J., Reid, M., and Suzuki, N. (2008) Young People and Territoriality in British Cities. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation