The 2011 Summer Riots: Learning from History -Remembering '81

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Abstract

Arguments that have emphasised the apparent meaninglessness and mindlessness of the 2011 riots rest on a number of assumptions and assertions. This includes for example the claim that such riots were fundamentally different on a number of levels compared to those of the past and particularly in relation to those of the 1980s. Whilst the latter have been viewed more sympathetically, with meanings and grievances now largely understood and accepted, and even seen as noble, the 2011 disturbances have been seen as lacking any real or legitimate grievances. By contradicting claims about the uniqueness of the recent riots (whilst also acknowledging important differences), it is possible to challenge assertions that firstly, the rioters did not have genuine grievances and secondly, that they should not be listened to. By examining the (qualified) similarities and continuities between riots past and present, we argue the case that it is likely that deep-seated grievances lay behind the 2011 riots that demands serious public and political engagement. Such perspective needs to stand in place of the dismissal that politicians were quick to offer, alongside their many instant diagnoses of the rioters' conditions and the social evils they represent. The qualitative differences that do exist between the urban unrest of 1981 and the 2011 English riots reflect the historical specificities' of these periods and the immediate material conditions within which each are grounded.

Keywords: History, 1981, Liverpool, Continuity and Change, Policing, Scarman

Introduction

1.1 Arguments that have emphasised the apparent meaninglessness and mindlessness of the 2011 riots rest on a number of assumptions and assertions. This includes for example the claim that such riots were fundamentally different on a number of levels compared to those of the past and particularly in relation to those of the 1980s. Whilst the latter have been viewed more sympathetically, with meanings and grievances now largely understood and accepted, and even seen as noble, the 2011 disturbances have been seen as lacking any real or legitimate grievances. By contradicting claims about the uniqueness of the recent riots (whilst also acknowledging important differences), it is possible to challenge assertions that firstly, the rioters did not have genuine grievances and secondly, that they should not be listened to. By examining the (qualified) similarities and continuities between riots past and present, we argue the case that it is likely that deep-seated grievances lay behind the 2011 riots that demands serious public and political engagement. Such perspective needs to stand in place of the dismissal that politicians were quick to offer, alongside their many instant diagnoses of the rioters' conditions and the social evils they represent. The qualitative differences that do exist between the urban unrest of 1981 and the 2011 English riots reflect the historical specificities of these periods and the immediate material conditions within which each are grounded.

Continuity and change: 1981 and 2011

2.1 Utilising historical analysis to explain the 2011 riots can be both beneficial and contradictory. Looking back at previous riots can be useful in providing a wider context within which more recent events can be positioned. It also enables us to understand whether such events and the responses these provoke are in fact unique in British society or form part of a longer lineage. Employing a historical perspective to better understand contemporary riots is also beneficial in terms of the lessons to be learnt from past events. At the same time, historical analysis can be problematic, particularly where this is utilised to recycle past

explanations and responses that have dismissed such events in simplistic and trite terms. These add little to our understanding of contemporary unrest and can actually be damaging. Past riots for example may be qualitatively different in terms of their underlying causes, the communities and geographical spaces they encompass, and the way such events have been played out. In such cases, resurrecting uniform stock responses from the recent past can fall into the trap of missing the complexities that exist between historical and contemporary unrest. In identifying similarities and differences between the riots of 1981 and 2011, such episodes can be understood as important events in their own right, as well as reflections of deeper social processes of historical continuities and change, and contemporary specificities and difference.

2.2 Looking back into British history, the riots of 2011 are neither new nor novel. Indeed riots more generally are not a new phenomenon and form an integral part of Britain's social and political landscape. Before August 2011, the most recent widespread disturbances occurred in the inner-cities in the 1980s and some clear comparisons and distinctions can be made between the two. In terms of identifying similarities between 1981 and 2011, both occurred against a background of economic crisis that particularly affected marginalised and disaffected communities. In the 1980s, Thatcherite economic policies saw Britain's inner-cities bearing the brunt of recession with youth unemployment almost double in some areas and with massive problems around policing, particularly of black communities. Today, 'double-dip' economic recession, a shrinking public sector (including cuts to public spending) and the attendant increase in the marketisation of public services, whilst not an exact replica of the 1980s, nevertheless reflects similar neo-liberal tendencies. Symptomatic of such developments has been increased youth unemployment with the added phenomena of the NEETS – those who are not in education, employment or training. Such conditions disproportionately affect the poor and the marginalised and impacts most heavily on youth. Indeed, increased levels of alienation and marginalisation have manifest most starkly among young males who formed the largest single group in both the 1981 and 2011 riots.

2.3 Continuities can also be seen in terms of similar press coverage of the two periods. Research by Burgess (1985) on the 1980s riots described how press constructions of the 'inner-cities' labelled these as separate, isolated, racialised spaces where battles ensued between the authorities (the police) and the out of control 'mob', reminiscent of nineteenth century struggles for order. Whilst this depiction of the inner-cities was a distinct feature of the 1980s, other elements would be played out again in 2011. In 1981 for example, issues of law and order, criminality and lack of parental control figured large in the *Daily Mail, Daily Star, Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* (Burgess 1985 cited in Frost and Phillips 2011: 72). Such themes appeared in a number of the 2011 press reports. For example, the *Telegraph* talked of 'Guerilla warfare erupts as no one knows where mob will strike next' (9 August 2011); "THUGS held in the August riots were part of a feckless criminal underclass" (sun 25 October 2001) and the *Daily Mail's* Melanie Phillips identified feral children with feral parents' (11 August 2011) that again placed a question mark over issues of parenting. Indeed, this particular issue was identified as one of the factors for causing the 2011 riots in the recent LSE/Guardian *Reading the Riots* (Riots Communities and Victims Panel Investigation March 2012).

2.4 Back in 1981, the Scarman Report (1981) was initiated to look into the Brixton unrest and extended to encompass other inner-city disturbances in that year. It found 'complex political, social and economic factors' had led to a 'disposition towards violent protest' (cited in Frost & Phillips 2011: 45). Scarman cited deprivation, high youth unemployment and 'hostility between a high proportion of the youth of the local community and the police seem well established' (Scarman 1981: 13). The report also identified criminal damage and arson as an important feature of the 1981 riots. A number of these issues speak to the 2011 riots, particularly in terms of the broader economic context, tensions with the police and criminal damage and looting. However, there are other characteristics that clearly set the two periods apart and which support claims that the two periods were qualitatively distinct at a number of important levels. Firstly, looking back to the immediate cause of unrest in 1981, it was an incident between the police and the black community that provided the spark that linked into deeper tensions underlying the policing of such communities. Scarman (1981: 13) argued that there existed 'a strong racial element in the disorders; but they were not a race riot'. The 1981 disturbances involved both black and white communities but occurred in the inner-city areas containing concentrations of black settlement where tension around policing was a major causal factor. The detaining of a stabbed black youth by the police in Brixton and the arrest of a black man, Leroy Cooper in Liverpool, precipitated unrest in both these areas. In some ways, these events mirror those in Tottenham in 2011 where the shooting of a black man, Mark Duggan by the police subsequently led to riots here that spread throughout London and other parts of England (discussed below). The 2011 Tottenham riots clearly had a distinct 'racial element' that revolved around strained police-community relations, yet this was not universally repeated in the ensuing riots that followed. Moreover, issues around the policing of BME communities in 2011 have not manifested themselves on the whole through similar responses to those of 1981.

2.5 Secondly, we now know that those involved in the 2011 disturbances came from all ethnic and racial groups, with 40 per cent of those arrested describing themselves as white, 39 per cent as black, 11 per cent as mixed race, 8 per cent as Asian and 2 per cent from another background (*The Independent* 25 October 2011; *BBC Online* 24 October 2001). Taken together, BME groups constituted the largest category (at least 58 per cent if we exclude the 2 per cent 'other background') of those *arrested* though this does not provide conclusive evidence of all those involved by ethnic group. In contrast, of those involved in the 1981 Liverpool disturbances, over half of those arrested were white (Gifford 1989).

2.6 Thirdly, Scarman was clear that the 1981 disturbances were not premeditated or planned but were spontaneous eruptions (Scarman 1981: 45). This represents another obvious but important point of departure from the 2011 riots where the use of social media played an critical role in spreading and some would say 'organising' a number of outbreaks after Tottenham.

2.7 Fourthly, the 1980s disturbances were highly politicised in terms of the motivations of some of those involved. In Brixton and Liverpool, the use of stop and search powers in both these cities had been used disproportionally to target young black males, proof for many of endemic police racism. The detaining and arrest of those individual black males in Brixton and later Liverpool was the final straw as broader based community anger and frustration, built up over many months and years, finally erupted. This was 'payback time' in the words of 'David', a 16-year-old Liverpool resident. David is clear about what the 1981 Liverpool riots were about, it was a battle between the community and the police. Taking on the establishment proved to be an extremely empowering experience for those communities that had been at the sharp end of police injustice:

> To see the power of people, a community united as one with one target. People actually standing together and drawing their line in the sand. That's it, we've had enough, this is payback [...] They came together and fought. People still willing to take on the police despite their numbers....and they won! Can you imagine that, to see them running away, to see officers actually getting up and running away (Frost & Phillips 2011: 9)

2.8 Michael Simon, 13 at the time of the 1981 Liverpool riots describes being 'inspired' by the levels of community solidarity that was shown against police racism and brutality:

> For me, it just seemed like this was the beginning of a war... because there was an option, the future for me was like you grow up, the police will arrest you whenever they want, they'll beat you up and you will have a criminal record if they say you do....in my own mind, it was wholly justified, every single part of it. (Frost & Phillips 2011: 14)

Whilst investigations are still underway into what caused the 2011 English riots, such episodes were 'political' in that they raise broader issues of power, crime, social exclusion and inequality. However, what is debateable is whether such actions were politically grounded and motivated within particular oppressed communities as they had been more clearly in 1981.

Learning from history

3.1 Historical comparison can be productive when seeking to make sense of contemporary society. This enables us to see contemporary phenomena as rooted in past events, ideas and actions or what Foucault (1972) termed 'histories of the present'. In many ways, there exists much continuity between the past and the present, particularly in relation to the way public disorder has been perceived and presented. Discourse surrounding riots and perceived moral break-down can present such processes as unique to that particular historical juncture. Presenting such events as an aberration from the norm appears to reflect dominant ideas around the fears and concerns that particular social groups in society may pose. This in turn can serve to support ideas that call for greater forms of social control.

Criminality

3.2 Many of the explanations given at the time of the 1981 riots resonate with the initial knee-jerk reactions that we saw as the 2011 riots unfolded, particularly the themes of criminality, 'black culture' and law and order. Thus, Prime Minister David Cameron described the rioters as 'thugs and delinquents' and argued 'It is essential for those in power in Britain that the riots now sweeping the country can have no cause beyond feral wickedness. This is nothing but "criminality, pure and simple"' (*The Guardian* 10 August 2011). This echoes arguments used in the 1980s when a Thatcher-led government offered similar explanations to account for the inner-city disturbances. These sentiments were reflected in the Chief Constable of Liverpool views, Kenneth Oxford who declared 'This is not a racial issue as such. It is exclusively a crowd of black hooligans intent on making life unbearable and indulging in criminal activity' (*The Guardian* 6 July 1981)

3.3 Others have reduced what happened in August to the violence and behaviour of organized gangs (also seen in 1981, with the *Daily Mail* headline 'Mobs of black youths roaming the streets'). Controversial medievalist historian David Starkey made reference to a 'nihilistic but fashionable' gangster culture that had drawn inspiration from black culture (*The Telegraph* 13 August 2011). Arguments like these, form part of a much longer lineage of social commentators whose focus on criminality and moral decline distract from more serious analyses of causation and add little to our understanding. Such explanations link in to Conservative arguments around the 'problem of youth' as recalcitrant, anarchic and amoral, the result of 'poor parenting'. Such diagnoses have in turn helped justify the hard-line punitive prison sentences that followed the August riots and informed initial responses to deal with those out on the streets, including government calls for the use of plastic bullets, water cannon and troops (*The Guardian* 10 August 2011).

3.4 Reflecting back on recent history there are clear continuities in terms of perceived causal factors to explain the historical outbreaks of riots and unrest, particularly as this relates to the theme of criminality and moral decline. Here, links have been drawn between causation and factors that tap into historically specific narratives that may at times also link into moral panics. In 1919 and 1948, anti-black riots broke out in Liverpool (and other seaports) in which black sailors and others were brutally attacked with several fatalities. Explanations given at the time focussed on issues of 'black criminality' and more alarmingly, from those who espoused pseudo-scientific race theorists and advocated eugenics, inter-racial relationships between local white women and black sailors (Frost 2008; Jenkinson 2009). 'Solutions' to the 1919 riots led to Orders in Council (in 1920 and in 1925 The Special Restriction [Coloured Aliens Seamen] Order) that would restrict the entry of black sailors and monitor those already here. Others would be deported along with their White British wives if proof of British nationality could not be obtained (Lane

1995, Fryer 1984, Christian 2008). The 'solution' to these riots was to blame and punish the victims through the use of these events as justifications for the greater monitoring of those attacked and to restrict further entry through anti-immigration measures.

3.5 Britain's apparent historical 'criminal problem' and moral decline, can be further gleaned from Geoffrey Pearson's *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983) (cited in *The Economist - Bagehot's Notebook* (August 2011). This gives some insightful examples of the way a moralist discourse, based on a fictional narrative of previous golden eras runs throughout British history. Pearson (1983) cites the 1978 Conservative Party annual conference where concerns around indiscipline and criminality (including football hooliganism) provoked hard-line punitive responses. Thus, calls to 'bring back the birch' alongside 'Saturday night floggings' and 'detention centres modelled on army discipline' were suggested as ways to reverse this moral decline, challenge criminal tendencies and get back to the more halcyon days of the 1950s. However, as Pearson points out, twenty years earlier at the 1958 annual Conservative conference similar concerns were expressed as one delegate declared: "over the past 25 years we in this country, through misguided sentiment, have cast aside the word "discipline", and now we are suffering from it" and how young people were "no longer frightened of the police". Similar punitive 'solutions' to those cited twenty years later were offered (cited in The Economist -Bagehot's Notebook 16 August 2011).

3.6 If we move forward to the 1981 inner-city riots, one of the dominant narratives at the time was that of the apparent 'problem' of black communities from a law and order perspective. Even before the 1980s riots erupted, we can get a sense of this perspective from some of the openly racist views of the Chief Constable of Merseyside – Kenneth Oxford. Mr Oxford's views of the black communities he was supposed to serve would not only influence the style of policing here, but would also inform subsequent explanations for the 1981 Liverpool riots. Oxford complained of the 'natural proclivities towards violence' that the people of Liverpool 8 displayed and dismissed the rioters as 'a crowd of black hooligan's intent on making life unbearable and indulging in criminal activities (Frost & Phillips 2001: 32, 40). Speaking several years before the 1981 riots to the *Listener Magazine* (1978), Oxford had pathologised this community along the following lines:

> 'Policemen in general and detectives in particular, are not racialist, despite what many Black groups believe. [...] Yet they are the first to define the problem of half-castes in Liverpool. Many are the products of liaisons between Black seamen and white prostitutes in Liverpool 8, the red light district. Naturally they grow up without any kind of recognisable home life. Worse still, after they have done the rounds of homes and institutions they gradually realise that they are nothing. The Negroes will not accept them as Blacks, and whites just assume they are coloureds. As a result, the half-caste community of Merseyside – or more particularly Liverpool – is well outside recognised society' (Frost & Phillips 2011: 32)

3.7 During and after the 1981 Liverpool riots and not unlike those in August 2011, immediate reactions focussed on punishment. Michael Simon was 13 at the time and spent five days locked up in a police cell and served a further two and a half months in a Young Offenders' Centre before being released without charge:

> 'I was the only one [in the family] that got arrested. [The police] just burst into the house and arrested me. Got absolutely battered as well, got drove round for half an hour, got battered. I remember getting battered and it not hurting; I don't know whether that's an adrenaline rush. I thought they were going to kill us because as you're growing up you hear incidents of people [dying]. [...] Took us to Cheapside, battered us again. I spent five days in Cheapside, which at that time was [tiny] Victorian cells but it was like 25 in a cell......so 6 or 7 of you could sleep at a time, the rest just literally had to stand up around the cell...didn't get a thing to eat. Looking at it now, these were grown men and we were kids!.... I thought they were gonna kill us, I thought we'd got off lightly anyway, I really did think they were going to kill us in there' (Frost & Phillips 2011: 16)

3.8 In the longer term, government investment through a series of regeneration projects (a number of which were already planned before the 1981 riots) signalled some recognition of the serious economic decline of the port of Liverpool but they failed to adequately challenge more deep-seated problems. A major limitation was that such policies did not target particular problems around youth unemployment in Liverpool 8 – the frontline of the 1981 disturbances. Nor did incarcerating young people for involvement in the disturbances help to tackle more complex, deep-seated problems. The analogy with the 2011 riots in terms of harsh prison sentences partially reflects responses in the 1980s, though gung-ho attitudes articulated in calls for suspension of benefits (including housing) represents an important difference from the 1980s. Such calls can only serve to further socially exclude and alienate those young people already on the disaffected margins of British life. Yet there are many other salutary lessons we can take on board by reflecting on the recent past, including the need to take seriously the plight and perspectives of young people today.

Policing

3.9 There are some distinct differences between the 1980s riots and those that occurred in England in 2011. The 1980s urban unrest exploded in the inner-city areas containing concentrations of black communities and was often sparked by issues of policing. These disturbances were also more politicised, involving wider sections of the community (including young and old) that came together to protest around issues of police racism. Moreover, such uprisings were not planned but were instead spontaneous eruptions of anger and frustrations that linked into years of police brutality, corruption and harassment of local communities. In each case, such riots would eventually be sparked by some police

incident that became the final straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. Whilst looting was a feature of the 1980s riots, the August 2011 riots took this to a whole new level as the looting of targeted shops reflected a form of consumer fetishism, indicative of modern consumer society today.

3.10 If we turn to the riots that broke out in Tottenham in August 2011 these were seen to be the spark that ignited others around the country. Yet from what we know so far, what happened in Tottenham was quite distinct from the rest of the English riots, as the events here related to specific localised issues around policing. The shooting of a 29 year old black man – Mark Duggan and the way the police handled this in terms of failing to inform the family, insisting that the police were shot at by Duggan and the police's refusal to speak to those who peacefully marched to the police station in search of answers – precipitated unrest there. No similar incidents have yet emerged elsewhere to suggest such a causal link. Indeed such events are remarkably reminiscent of police-community tensions of the 1980s.

3.11 A community organiser Stafford Scott subsequently spoke of the police's refusal to engage with the peaceful protestors and warned of mounting frustration:

> "If a senior police officer had come to speak to us, we would have left. We arrived at 5pm; we had planned a one-hour silent protest. We were there until 9pm. Police were absolutely culpable. Had they been more responsive when we arrived at the police station, asking for a senior officer to talk with the family, we would have left the vicinity before the unrest started.

> "It is unforgivable police refused dialogue. We know the history here – how can Tottenham have a guy killed by police on Thursday, and resist requests for dialogue from the community 48 hours later?" (*The Guardian* 8 August 2011)

3.12 There are some distinct similarities between events surrounding the Tottenham riots in 2011 and those that occurred in 1981. Indeed the scenes in Tottenham during the riots of a blazing 1930s building housing a carpet shop is reminiscent of the iconic scenes in Liverpool in 1981 when the Rialto Building went up in smoke. Yet, these symbolic linkages are not the only thing these two riots had in common. Both the riots in the 1980s and the Tottenham unrest in 2011 relate specifically to police-community relations particularly as this relates to black communities there, and both occurred against a backdrop of rising levels of inequality, youth unemployment and social exclusion. Drawing on the authors' research undertaken for their book, '*Liverpool '81: remembering the riots*', many of those interviewed 30 years after the 1981 riots were very clear about the nature of policing at the time and the way dissatisfaction with policing particularly in the Liverpool 8 area precipitated the riots there.

3.13 Michael Simon 13 at the time remembers many incidents between the community and the police that preceded the 1981 Liverpool riots:

> 'You had instances.....I remember many times being beat up by the police, not even arrested sometimes, just beat up [....] you grow up with a deep hatred of the police and the system... If they're going to pull you and just charge you for whatever they want, you just lose all respect for them... there was [one policeman], he used to just kick the shit out of people in the street, there was nothing you could do about it at all and if you did complain, you'd just be arrested and they'd just make a charge up [....] you had so many incidents of people just about having enough so rather than standing passively and shouting names at the police when they were arresting someone [confrontations broke out]. I remember someone getting arrested on Granby Street ... that kind of turned into a bit of a flashpoint and that was maybe two weeks beforehand' (Frost & Phillips 2011: 33-34).

3.14 Jon Murphy, the current Chief Constable of Merseyside and member of the Operational Support Division during the Liverpool riots 1981 concedes that:

> '[...} if we had built better relationships with the communities, rather than just police them in a particular way, this might not have happened. So right from the outset there is a recognition that we need to change here...' (Frost & Phillips 2011: 61)

3.15 Whilst some of the police-community issues relating to the 1981 Liverpool riots were acknowledged, particularly through the Scarman (1981) and Gifford (1989) reports, it would not be until the Macpherson Inquiry (1999) into the police handling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence that the issue of institutional racism was officially recognised. Whilst some steps were taken to try and address this, for example public servants like the police could now be prosecuted under Race Relations legislation, it would seem that many lessons of the past have not been heeded. Indeed, just before the publication of the Macpherson Report in 1999, the Liverpool 8 Law Centre had stated that: 'police services are more directed at punitive, rather than preventative, proactive and supportive services towards black people who come into contact with police officers' (cited in Frost and Phillips 2011: 61-62). One interviewee 'David' who was 16 during the 1981 Liverpool riots reflects on policing immediately after the 1981 riots:

> 'There was a time after the riots where the police were scared to approach you. For the first time they didn't want to know your name. I never expected that to happen, to finally be left alone – marvellous! To be able to do what a majority of people do as a matter of fact, to just be able to go about your business' (cited in Frost and Phillips 2011: 62)

3.16 'David' reflects on the police today:

> 'I wouldn't say it's changed...I think I'd say they've got slimier. I believe in the concept of the law, but I believe in a concept of law that's fair and equal across the board. Not a law

that is there to serve the needs of the rich social elite or corporate business because if you look at the law, they're always out there defending big business. They're defending those that pay the wages. This makes them in my eyes no more than state-sponsored mercenaries' (cited in Frost and Phillips 2011: 62)

Indeed, following the riots in 2011 and 1981, both communities in Tottenham and Liverpool came together in defence of those convicted and to mount campaigns for future justice.

Defence organizations – 1981 & 2011

3.17 Following the 2011 riots in London, hundreds of people from the communities in Tottenham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets and elsewhere came together to form defence campaigns in support of those facing what have come to be seen as disproportionately harsh charges. Moreover, the family of Mark Duggan with the support of community organisations continued to demand answers and an admittance of police culpability. The Tottenham Defence Campaign in drawing links with past events is very clear as to why it has found it necessary to come together as a group:

> As family and friends come together to remember Cynthia Jarrett some 26 years after she was taken from us, we find it incomprehensible that this borough, Haringey, has seen three more members of our community killed whilst in the 'custody' of Metropolitan Police Officers. No community should have this as their reality. As a result this is a community that has come to the conclusion that there is no justice – there's just us.

> The police must be held to account over the death of four members of our community, for their failings to contact the family of Mark Duggan about his death and their woeful response to family members on the peaceful demonstration in August. Within the community, people believe the police bear ultimate culpability for the rioting that took place in Tottenham through their failure to respond to the family or to act as events unfolded. Yet it's the community of Tottenham who will be further stigmatised and punished. We will be calling on the IPCC to carry out its duty and ensure their investigation reveals the full truth about the killing of Mark Duggan. We will be calling on the Government to remember the lessons learnt from the eighties, as the response that we are witnessing is almost guaranteed to further marginalise the already marginalised; this will not lessen any likelihood of future rioting it will, inevitably, increase it (Stafford Scott – Tottenham Defence Campaign 2011)

3.18 This response echoes those in Liverpool after the 1981 riots where communities came together against police injustice and to demand action, in this case, the resignation of the Chief Constable of Merseyside at the time – Kenneth Oxford. Oxford had previously made a number of public racist slurs against Liverpool's black and mixed-heritage communities. He had also blamed the Liverpool riots on 'a crowd of black hooligans intent on making life unbearable and indulging in criminal activities' (Cited in Frost and Phillips 2011: 40). The Liverpool 8 Defence Committee argued that the Chief Constable 'is the prime obstacle in the way of any constructive dialogue between the police and the community'. They further argued:

> '…fair and proper policing of any community lies with the Chief Constable. Oxford's own racism, combined with his belief that tough and repressive policing methods are the best way of keeping order have resulted in excessive police harassment, especially of black people, which stretches back many years….Oxford's own racism is an established fact. He is well-known for making derogatory and racist remarks about the Liverpool 8 community [….] Oxford's own racism allows his officers to give expression to their racism and to indulge in the harassment of the black community. If the Chief Constable is a known racist, how can he be capable of stamping out racism in his own police force?' (Cited in Frost and Phillips 2011: 40-41).

Conclusion

4.1 Explanations to account for the 2011 riots demands a through and in-depth analysis that does justice to understanding the complexities and multifaceted strands that contributed to this unrest. The paper presented here has used the unrest of 1981 to see what, if anything can be learnt from this. We have shown that whilst the 1980s urban unrest was qualitatively different in many ways to that of 2011, there also exist significant synergies that relate to wider contextual issues. This includes ideological responses to the riots; a widespread hatred of the police, high youth unemployment and the beginning of public sector cuts. Questions of injustice in terms of the shooting of Mark Duggan and the hard-line sentences meted out to those arrested in 2011 also resonates with the 1980s. Moreover, just as communities were forced to come together in their own defence and against the police in Liverpool 8 in 1981, so too have communities been active in similar ways in Tottenham following Duggan's death. If we accept that a number of those issues that were deemed important in 1981 were mirrored in the 2011 riots, this leads us to conclude that the 2011 riots were not unique. Acknowledging that synergies existed between the two periods also challenges claims that the 2011 outbreaks were based on pure mindlessness, that rioters had no real or important grievances and that these did not represent legitimate forms of political action. The piece written here shows the relevance of employing C. Wright Mills' (1959) *Sociological Imagination.* If history can teach us anything, it is that we should learn from the recent past before employing knee-jerk reactions based on superficial and instant diagnoses that do little to aid our understanding of complex social processes. The recent completion of the joint LSE/Guardian *Reading the Riots* (Riots Communities and Victims Panel investigation March 2012), has indeed confirmed the complexities involved, citing 'a

range of factors including a lack of opportunities for young people, poor parenting, a failure of the justice system to rehabilitate offenders, materialism and suspicion of the police' (*The Guardian* 28 March 2012) amongst others. The report does not appear to acknowledge that the 2011 disturbances may have represented legitimate forms of action in the absence of other channels. Yet, whilst rioting may be limited in terms of bringing about long-term radical changes, the circumstances in which they occur is a litmus test of society's stability. In the words of Charles Tilly (1978: 6) 'riots' are 'an extension of politics by other means' and if history can teach us anything, it is that rioting and social unrest will be used as a last resort where other means are closed or have failed.

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