Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The Riots One Year on and an Academic's Unquenched Anger

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A night in the Brixton Market (aka the Granville Arcade)

1.1 I recall a night in the Brixton Market in July 2011. The location is known to long-time residents of Brixton as the Granville Arcade but recently has been renamed The Brixton Market. The name change is a reflection of the many economic and social changes that have occurred in Brixton, my home for the last eight years; and for most of the time I've lived in London. On this evening, a rare warm summers' night, I sat and reflected. During the day the same market was filled with a multicultural blend of Nigerian patrons in traditional and colourful cloths and older Jamaican women in search of the best Yams. Latin Americans flock to the Colombian restaurant that boarders the covered part of the market for the lunch time special; of which the quantity of food is of a particularly good value for money. And running along the outside of the covered market; South Asian market venders whose vegetable I prefer work side by side with south London white working class venders whose fruit I prefer.

1.2 On that night in July 2011 along with a friend, I sat in the covered part of the market and ate crepes at a trendy restaurant featured in 'Time Out Magazine'. In the background we listened to a DJ's selection of uplifting but not too soulful 'house music' tracks (as a Chicago native, the birthplace of 'house music' I tend to be a bit discerning about soulful 'house music'). It struck me and not for the first time that there was no representation of the people who frequent the same market during the day. Amongst the 100 plus people who surrounded me eating at the various restaurants and cafes: my friend; a few others; and I were the only people of colour present. 'This is Brixton', I declared, 'and where are the Black people?'

The contested meaning of gentrification

2.1 The term Gentrification has come a long way since the British sociologist Ruth Glass coined it in her 1964 publication to describe the displacement of working class residents in urban neighbourhoods. She used Islington in north London as one of her examples. In the years since and despite on-going intellectual debate academics have come to understand gentrification as a process that changes the character and composition of a neighbourhood and results in the direct and indirect displacement of lower income households with higher income households (Abu-Lughod 1999; Clay 1979; Glass 1964; Kennedy & Leonard 2001; Wyly & Hammel 2005; Zukin 1987, 2008, 2010). Whilst academics continue to debate the theoretical implications of gentrification in relation to social change, urban demography, and inequality; activists, politicians, and the general public are divided over whether gentrification is beneficial or detrimental for neighbourhood residents (Atkinson 2003, Atkinson 2004; Brown-Saracino 2010; Hollingworth & Mansaray 2012).

2.2 London and Palen (1984) identified five ways to explain gentrification including; demographic-ecological (1); sociocultural (2); political-economical (3); community networks (4); and finally social movements (5). Each approach can be used to explain economic and social developments in some parts of Brixton. However the sociocultural explanation of gentrification speaks more to my observations as a sociologist. Moreover, as a resident of Brixton, this approach bests explains the developments I witnessed in Brixton in the five years leading to the 2011 Riots. London and Palen argue that values, sentiments, attitudes, ideas, beliefs, and choices better explain and predict human behaviour, not demographics (1984). With this focus they argue that pro-urban beliefs enable new residents to see value in living in cities (an 'urban chic') as opposed to the rural and suburban communities in which they originate. Some of these new community members see themselves as 'urban pioneers' with a revitalizing role in the community and they engage in activities to improve the community in an effort to increase their own comfort; perceived insecurity; and property values (see Allen & Taylor 2013; Jensen 2013).

2.3 My recognition and affinity to a sociocultural explanation of gentrification is very much rooted in my experiences as a teenager and young adult in my native Chicago where I first encountered the word

gentrification on a street after school while walking home. A man handed me a flier that read 'Stop Starbucks from Pushing Us Out'. Indeed numerous Starbucks began to appear at the same time the colour and indeed the spirit of the community changed. Where there had been mostly black, brown, and badge faces, within a few years a more homogenous, less diverse community now dominated by newer, affluent white faces. Before the change on any given day and particularly in the summer one could walk the streets and hear the sounds of Puerto Rican men playing dominos accompanied by salsa music; and Black men competitively playing basketball accompanied by an audience of hyper vigilante younger boys and girls. Before the neighbourhood began to change I was one of those younger boys; and just as the neighbourhood began to change I had grown tall enough and possessed enough basketball skills and attitude to actually play instead of watch. On a recent trip to Chicago and to my old neighbourhood; the absence of Puerto Ricans, salsa music and black men and boys playing basketball was acute and made me feel sad. As I recall the new people who moved into the neighbourhood did not much appreciate Puerto Ricans sitting on the corner talking, laughing and playing dominos; nor did they appreciate loud salsa music blaring from windows and cars. Their children did not come to the park to watch me and other black men and boys play basketball. However, they did call the police; often. And the whiter the neighbourhood became, the more frequently my friends and I were stopped and searched by the police.

A duality of lived experiences

3.1 There was a duality in my Chicago neighbourhood, one that I recognized in Brixton 20 years later; a duality which exists between trendy new cafes and restaurants frequented by new community members whose ethnicity is dissimilar from my own but whose socioeconomic background is not. These new establishments operate side by side with older more established 'mom and pop' restaurants selling Curry Goat, Ackee and salt fish, and Jamaican patties. During the day alongside new business are the old market stalls selling Nigerian and other African apparel. And like that July 2011 night in the Brixton Market you rarely see few if any Black faces in the new establishments or white faces in the older ones. And then there are the young people on the streets; boys mostly, whose presence is viewed differently by older residents and the newly arrived hipsters and yuppies; the latter include some armed with their fear and perceptions and some quite concerned with the value of their newly acquired properties running along Coldharbour Lane (adjacent to what had been known by older residents as the 'front line' making reference to the streets; a place where the police utilised the Sus law most vigorously and where they clashed most violently with black youth in April 1981 (Goulbourne 2009)).

3.2 Indeed in recent years I recognised a duality and a tension in Brixton that did not feel all that different from the duality and tension that existed in my Chicago neighbourhood in the late 1980s and early 1990s; a tension that derives from maintaining this duality of different lived experiences and different notions of community. And as noted by my friend on that night in July 2011; it was a tension bound to boil over at some point as it had done in my Chicago neighbourhood.

Unquenched anger

4.1 As a university lecturer and my friend a production manager for a large multinational corporation, we fall within an income bracket that makes the £8 crepes 'affordable' and as Americans we possess an appreciation for decent 'house music' even if (on this night) it lacked a bit of soul. But as Black people we could not ignore the fact that in the heart of Brixton most of the people around us did not look like us. I remember thinking that one must question a space that does not work to attract local people; people who have called Brixton home since Windrush (1948); their children who were born in Brixton in the 1950s, 60s and 70s and some of whom challenged racism and police brutality in the 1981 and 1985 demonstrations; and then there are those like my friend and I who came to Brixton in the years before the recent changes originally attracted to the community not because of cheap accommodation or a desire to get onto the property ladder but rather the diversity of the Black diaspora that exist in Brixton; and its history; a history although different from our own, was similar enough for us to feel comfortable, safe and at home in Brixton without seeing a need to improve the community in the ways that many newly arrived members now articulate.

4.2 Part of the duality and tension in Brixton can be understood by the way gentrification is viewed. For some it is a way to describe rampant development and community (dis)cohesion and for others it is a term used to describe the improving of a community or as my friend noted that night in Brixton in July 2011; 'the civilizing of a community'; or at least she and I thought this was the attitude of the people who surrounded us and how they viewed their presence in Brixton. These new urban pioneers with all their urban chicness generate reflection. But when my American accent and physical presence in the market mistake's me as one whose views and values are in line with those who seek to change the neighbourhood; improve it and make it more civil; then I realise that I possess some unquenched anger and that perhaps I should not frequent the Brixton Market.

4.3 My understanding of the duality and tension that exist in Brixton in the months leading to the riots is also derived from my participation in riots/protest some 20 years earlier. On 29 April 1992 following the acquittal of Los Angeles police officers in the savage beating of Rodney King thousands of people took to the streets. As a 16 year old kid I was angered by the verdict and this anger exacerbated my frustrations related to the changes in my neighbourhood. I imagine in August 2011, some kid in Brixton viewed the killing of Mark Duggan the way I viewed the acquittal of those police officers for beating Rodney King. In April 1992 I took to the streets of Chicago much like the people in Brixton did in August 2011. On that night in April 1992 along with my acquisition of new shoes; a size too small, I raged violently against businesses; the police; gentrification; and a perceived injustice stemming from constantly being stopped by the police because I 'fit the description'. I raged because even without a sociological imagination and analysis I saw how economic developments worked to push people, my friends and their families; mostly ethnic people and habitual renters; out of the community. And so when I

watched the riots on TV, I initially thought I was watching scenes from an American city but soon I recognised the Foot Locker and Vodaphone shop I pass to enter the Brixton Tube Station. Like many the images shocked me but I suspect unlike many, I was not surprised.

Quenching anger with a sociological imagination

5.1 Academic research can enable people to understand what can appear to be a phenomenon void of understanding. Academic investigation can also quench anger and frustration and allow for a measure of reason to rule. And so a year after I raged on the streets of Chicago, I joined an organisation called 'Queer to the Left' and there I began to focus my rage in a more constructive way. In the 20 years since, I acquired not only shoes that fit but a range of intellectual knowledge and academic skills and more important a sociological imagination which enables me to at least scientifically rationalise the kind of urban economic developments in my Chicago neighbourhood and which are taking place in Brixton if not to value and/or to celebrate these developments as progressing or civilizing the community.

5.2 Research also has the power to validate the experience of people whose voices are not always heard or understood. Validation has the power to heal and liberate individuals. I believe this validation goes a long way in helping to prevent such events from occurring in the future. But as a social scientist it is not so surprising I would feel this way. Nevertheless the conference and its themes of education and work futures in an age of austerity; community, cohesion and justice; framing the riots: discourse and publics; and youth, riotous spaces, riotous subjects not only provided an opportunity for reflection and understanding but also an opportunity to validate the experiences of those involved and those effected by the events of August 2011 in Brixton and in many other places in the England.

5.3 As illuminated by the wide range of research presented at the conference, the events of August 2011 may be different from the 'race riots' of 1981 and 1985 in England and 1992 in the USA. However at the heart of all these expressions of rage and frustration is a lack of understanding and this was certainly a theme amongst many of the presentations at this conference; be it an understanding of the challenges faced in the age of austerity; an understanding of young people who expressed frustration by being stopped and searched by the police; shopkeepers who (as we learned from presenters) did not all blame the rioters but some in some parts of London accused the police of allowing the riots to take place and substituting policing/stopping criminal acts with a reliance on CCTV footage; or an understanding of the way in which law enforcement and probation officers see their work in the context of an ever-changing and multicultural environment.

5.4 When I think about the August 2011 riots or protest or whatever word ones uses to describe those difficult days, I think about the young man I was in April 1992 and what factors drove me to act as I did on that night. In the last 20 years what has changed is my understanding of those forces that Dr Marisa Silvestri (Reader in Criminology) writes about in her blog on the conference; 'the power of social, racial, gendered and spatial positioning' (Silvestri 2012; 2013). And what I now recognise more than ever and what was certainly reinforced by the presentations and speakers at this conference is the power of intellectual discourse and social science investigations and how they enable us to understand what at times may seem to lack understanding and how they can quench unquenched anger.

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