



Race, Rumours and Riots: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

The riots of August 2011 have led to renewed discussion about the conditions that help to shape outbreaks of urban unrest. The role of race and ethnicity in the riots is one of the factors that has been discussed, although it has received relatively little attention when compared to earlier riots in 1981 and 1985. This paper argues that it is important to avoid easy generalisations about the role of race in the events of August 2011. It then explores the links between the riots and issues such as policing, urban deprivation and unemployment, and political inclusion and exclusion. It suggests that there is a need to locate the riots within their specific local and social environments and for more empirically focused research on the localities in which they occurred.

Keywords: Race; Riots; Collective Violence; Violence; Rumours

Introduction

1.1 Writing about the 1960s race riots Allan Silver commented that 'America has had an affinity for collective violence' (Silver 1968: 146). Until the 1980s the popular perception was that Britain did not have such an affinity, and forms of collective violence were seen as relatively rare and in a sense 'Un-British'. Yet since 1980 we have had a series of outbreaks of collective violence, often seen as linked to issues about race and ethnicity in a broad sense, though not exclusively so. There have been major outbreaks of urban unrest in 1981, 1985, 2001 and now in 2011. In between these major outbreaks of collective violence there have been more localised expressions of collective violence. Each of the major outbreaks has led to intense media debate, official investigations and some academic research. In practice, however, it is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to say that sociological research in this field remains relatively underdeveloped and speculative rather than based on detailed empirical research. With a few notable exceptions we have produced relatively little research that helps us to make sense of how collective violence erupts and its links to the wider social environment (Keith 1993; Bagguley and Hussain 2008). Given this relative neglect it is perhaps not surprising that after each major outbreak social scientists have been left looking on at the events but with little empirically informed research that can add much to the public and political discourse.

1.2 The most recent outbreaks of urban unrest on the streets of London, Birmingham, Manchester are a case in point. The riots have led to another flurry of public debate and media speculation about the reasons for the violence and their impact in terms of criminal justice policy and wider policy agendas. While the last major round of unrest in the 1980s and 2001 led to a number of reports and investigations that focused on questions about race and ethnicity (Hussain and Bagguley 2005; Rhodes 2009; Cantle 2001; Ouseley 2001; Scarman 1981), the August 2011 events have tended to be seen through a lens that has emphasised criminality and looting. Although the events in Tottenham after the shooting of Mark Duggan by the police bear a remarkable similarity to the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985, which took place in protest at the death of Cynthia Jarrett, the question of race and ethnicity has tended to be discussed in a more limited way. Given the range of the events that followed the initial outbreak of violence on the streets of Tottenham this is perhaps not surprising. The initial violence in Tottenham started in the evening of 6th August after a march on Tottenham Police Station to protest the death of Mark Duggan, which had occurred on 4th August. As the riots spread in the period from the 6th to the 10th of August, however, the media coverage and public debate about the events shifted away from issues about race and policing to a wider set of social and cultural symbols.

1.3 Yet it is important that we do not lose sight of the role that race and ethnicity may have played in both the riots themselves and in shaping some of the underlying conditions in the areas at the heart of the violence. It is this concern to explore the role of race and ethnic issues in the events of August 2011 that provides the main rationale for this paper. The focus will not be in providing a holistic overview of the events but on analysing the ways in which race and related questions about urban deprivation, inequality and policing have been discussed in relation to the August 2011 riots in Tottenham and other parts of the country. It will be argued that although we cannot see the recent riots through the lens of race alone, or simply as a re-run of the collective violence of the 1980s or 2001, it seems evident that the shooting of Mark Duggan and rumours about the role of the police provided a spark to the initial events in Tottenham and other localities. The events surrounding the shooting of Duggan remain the subject of an official investigation, but it is already clear that the role it played in providing a spark for the 2011 riots provides a link to previous riots in 1981 and 1985, when racialised rumours about the role of the police played an important role in the outbreak of violent confrontations between sections of minority communities and the police. This is not to generalise that all the events of August 2011 were linked only to questions about race and policing, or racism and social exclusions. But it would also be wrong to leave to one side the role that questions about race and ethnicity played in some localities in shaping the conditions that led to the latest in what is now a long list of violent unrest in a number of cities since the 1980s. A key theme throughout the paper will be to locate the complex ways in which questions about race framed the events of August 2011 as well as the responses to them in the period since. Before moving on to the question of race it is also important, however, to look at the other frames through which the August 2011 riots were seen.

Making sense of the riots

2.1 It is clear from research on riots and violent disturbances in a variety of contexts that although they may share some characteristics they are not a singular phenomenon (Wilkinson 2009; Collins 2008). In the period since the 1980s the various outbreaks of collective violence we have seen on the streets of British cities have taken a variety of forms, including violent confrontations with the police, street violence, confrontations between groups in a specific community and looting of shops and property. Indeed, it is clear that there is often disagreement about what kinds of events are covered by the term 'riot', and some scholars seek to use other terms such as 'rebellions' and 'urban unrest' to describe events such as the one we witnessed in August 2011. It is perhaps this complexity that explains the range of attempts to describe, analyse and explain what actually happened during those few days in early August 2011. The riots and disturbances that took place in Tottenham and across a number of cities and towns in England have been seen through a variety of lenses. More specifically they have been seen as: (i) a product of a 'Broken Britain'; (ii) as 'consumer society riots'; (iii) as a product of criminality and gang culture; (iv) as shaped by the social media technologies, such as *Twitter* and *BlackBerry Messenger*.

Broken Britain

2.2 The idea of the riots as a product of a 'Broken Britain' became a strong undercurrent in the commentaries on the riots almost as soon as the riots started. David Cameron was one of a number of politicians that focused on this dimension when he talked of the need to develop a response to the riots that linked tough policing to measures to 'mend our broken society' (Stratton 2011). This was a theme Cameron had used before the riots in formulating the agenda of the Coalition Government, but after the violence of August 2011 he was also keen to use this notion to distance the violence from any policies initiated by his administration and to construct them as the outcome of a breakdown of morality and a sense of order in some families and communities. This was certainly a theme that was frequently referred to by the Government, which sought to portray the riots not as a form of protest that could be linked to social and economic inequalities but as the product of the absence of morality and community in sections of the urban underclass. In the immediate aftermath of the events *The Sunday Telegraph* framed the riots as an expression of the 'erosion of morality' (McCulloch 2011).

Consumer Society Riots

2.3 Another strong theme in the media coverage of the riots focused on issues such as looting and the idea that they were in some sense 'consumer society riots'. Although images of looting and arson had been a theme in previous outbreaks of collective violence in the 1980s and in 2011 it became perhaps the dominant image of the August 2011 riots, as both TV and newspaper coverage focused on images of shops being attacked, looted or burned down. Sections of the media also picked up on the theme of the riots as an expression of 'rampant consumerism' and the notion that the rioters were engaged in forms of shopping by looting. Indeed the work of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman was cited by some as evidence that the riots of 2011 were essentially a product of the growth of social inequality in a context where groups of young people feel left out of 'consumer culture' (Bauman 2011).

Criminality

2.4 Much of the official and media response to the riots has been to see them as merely acts of looting and criminality, as the actions of feral children, as the work of criminal gangs within the urban underclass. This theme was not in itself new. Indeed, in both 1981 and 1985 the immediate response of the Thatcher Government was to see them as 'criminal acts' and to refute any attempt to see them as linked to issues such as urban deprivation, racial inequality and youth unemployment (Benyon and Solomos 1987). Some facets of the official response in 1981 and 1985, however, accepted the need to bring in issues such as racial inequality and the position of black youth into an account of the causes of the riots (Scarman 1981; 1985). In the context of August 2011, however, the emphasis on criminality and gang culture has been

much more central in public discourses. Thus a strong theme in the official response to the riots has been to see them in Gary Marx's term as essentially 'issueless riots' (Marx 1970). In other words the riots were seen as having little to do with wider social or economic issues, and the rioters were essentially engaged in 'criminality'. From a similar angle *The Sun* commented that 'The mob that turned the centre of Tottenham in London into a smoking ruin were not seeking justice. They are criminal thugs who were hell bent on theft, arson and violence' (Editorial 2011).

Social Media

2.5 An important new theme relative to previous accounts of riots in Britain focused on the role of social media technologies such as *Twitter* and *BlackBerry Messenger* as a means by which the riots spread from Tottenham in London to other parts of London and also to other cities and towns. The use of the internet and social media technologies as tools for political and social movement mobilisation has been widely discussed in recent years. Indeed, it had been a recurrent theme in coverage of anti-globalisation protests and in the student protests on 2010. The August 2011 riots highlighted the role of the new technologies both in disseminating information about acts of collective violence and in encouraging participation in looting. Given this context it is not surprising that media coverage both during the events and in the weeks that followed constructed the rapid spread of the riots as intimately linked to the widespread use of *Twitter* to spread news of specific events and to encourage looting. *The Express*, for example, headlined the spread of violence with the headline 'Now the Riots Spread as Twitter Thugs Fan Flames' (Twomey and Reynolds 2011).

2.6 Taken together these four frames have been important in much of the discussion that has followed on from the events in August 2011. They have a clear presence in the political language used by politicians to talk about the events and also run through the mass media coverage of the events.

Race, rumours and riots

3.1 What then of the role of race issues in the construction of responses to the riots? As argued above, in the context of the August 2011 events race played a limited role in most of the media discussion and even in the policy responses to the riots. This is not to say that it was absent or that the discussion of issues such as criminality and a breakdown of morality were not inflected with some elements of a racialised discourse. If one follows the media coverage of the events it is certainly possible to trace some elements of racialised discourse about particular events, such as the initial riots in Tottenham and Wood Green. The controversy over David Starkey's construction of the riots as a sign that a 'nihilistic gangster culture' had become a dominant norm in Britain was perhaps the most infamous example of such taken-for-granted racialised discourses being integrated into broader social and political explanations of the riots (Merrick 2011).

3.2 While much of the discussion of events outside of Tottenham and the surrounding areas was not focused on issues of race and ethnicity as such it is worth reflecting on how we can explore the role that questions about race, policing and related issues played a role in shaping at least aspects of the unrest during August 2011. Perhaps the most important ways in which questions about race seem to link up with what happened in August 2011 can be found in relation to the following issues: (i) race and policing; (ii) poverty, unemployment and education; (iii) political inclusion and exclusion.

Race and policing

3.3 As with previous examples of urban unrest in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 2001 the role of policing in racially and ethnically diverse communities has been at least a part of what the media, policy makers and academics have talked about in their attempts to make sense of the events. In particular the shooting of Mark Duggan by the police, the protest march to Tottenham Police Station and the outbreak of violence in Tottenham and nearby Wood Green drew parallels with earlier events that acted as a spark to violent protest and unrest, particularly the death of Cynthia Jarrett in Tottenham in 1885 (Benyon and Solomos 1988; Solomos 1986).

3.4 In his account of the 1981 riots in Brixton Lord Scarman was able to conclude that the riots were essentially an outburst of anger by young blacks against the police in a context where there were widespread grievances about the role of the police in the local community (Scarman 1981; Benyon 1984). While this diagnosis of the riots was not universally accepted it helped to focus attention on the role of local policing cultures in shaping outbursts of collective violence. In the three decades that followed there have been numerous attempts by the police, by governments and by other bodies to address the sources of these grievances and to develop strategies for managing urban unrest (Keith 1993; Waddington, Jobard and King 2009; Rowe 2007). These efforts were further reinforced after further unrest in 1985 and later in 2001, and by the public debates about the death of Stephen Lawrence. The Macpherson Report on the death of Stephen Lawrence provided a focus for some of these debates about race and policing (Macpherson 1999).

3.5 Such efforts led to both local and national initiatives to reform the police, to recruit more minority officers and to develop links between the police and local communities. Yet the initial unrest in Tottenham on 6th August highlighted the important role that the actions of the police, and even rumours about their actions, can play in providing a spark for collective violence to break out. Following the shooting of Mark Duggan by the police rumours circulated in the wider community, linking his death both to other examples of deaths in police custody and related grievances about the police. It is clear from the historical experiences of urban riots in the U.S. during the 1960s and from the earlier events in England during the

1980s and in 2001 that such rumours and stories about the police become an important factor in providing a spark for the violence that follows (Fogelson 1971; Olzak and Shanahan 1996). It was partly as a result of such rumours and a local protest march on Tottenham Police Station that the initial unrest in Tottenham and nearby Wood Green broke out. The sequence of events leading up to the initial violence and looting in Tottenham were thus deeply inflected by highly charged rumours about the police and their role in the death of Mark Duggan, but more generally about the role of the police in relation to local black communities generally and black youth in particular.

Poverty, unemployment and education

3.6 Given the importance of discourses about 'Broken Britain' and criminality in accounts of the riots it is perhaps not surprising that poverty, racialised inequalities, deprivation, youth unemployment were marginalised in initial political responses to the riots. In their official responses to the events the Coalition Government used political language that sought to portray the rioters as criminalised looters. This was a theme that was taken up in wider media coverage of the riots that constructed them as a kind of orgy of 'looting' and 'thieving'.

3.7 In this atmosphere few politicians, either nationally or locally, articulated a link between the riots and wider social inequalities, though there was some discussion in media discourses of events in Tottenham of youth unemployment and urban deprivation. It is interesting to note, in this context, that soon after the riots died down the Labour Opposition leader, Ed Miliband, argued that: 'Both culture and deprivation matter. To explain is not to excuse. But to refuse to explain is to condemn to repeat' (Stratton 2011). Yet, it seems important for researchers to explore the possible links between the wider social and economic conditions in the localities in which the riots took place and outbreaks of forms of collective violence. The situation in places such as Tottenham before and after the riots bears some similarity to what Harris and Wilkins have defined as the 'quiet riots' of unemployment, poverty, social disorganisation and housing and school deterioration (Harris and Wilkins 1988). It is interesting to note in this regard the comments of Stafford Scott, who has worked since the 1980s within the Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham. Scott notes that in the period since August 2011 the emphasis on seeing the riots as linked to criminality and gang culture has made it difficult to give voice to calls to provide more social and economic resources for the communities that live in the most deprived areas of Tottenham. He argues:

'Equality, fairness and justice must be on the table, for without this the regeneration of Tottenham High Road will be meaningless to many of its inhabitants, and the likelihood of another riot erupting will remain a distinct possibility' (Scott 2011).

In the current climate voices such as Scott's remain relatively isolated since the dominant discourses about the riots have given little credence to any links between the riots and issues of equality, fairness and justice.

Political inclusion and exclusion

3.8 At a broader level another dimension that has been relatively neglected in discussions of the riots is the issue of how far collective violence is linked to uneven processes of exclusion and inclusion within political institutions. There is some evidence that after the riots of the 1980s there has been some change in local political regimes in places such as Tottenham and efforts to use resources to tackle issues such as housing, poverty and education. Yet we know relatively little about the changing role of political cultures and leadership in the areas in which the riots took place, or the links between political institutions and the police. Yet we know that research in the U.S. has highlighted strong links between collective violence and historical and contemporary patterns of exclusion from politics and positions of power. Such research has helpfully explored the complex ways in which political regimes, urban spaces and social and economic conditions help to structure outbreaks of urban violence as well as shaping the conditions for defusing the potential for conflict (Abu-Lughod 2007; Lieberman and Silverman 1965). The recent outbreaks emphasize the need to locate collective violence within a context that takes account of political power relations as well as policing and social and economic exclusions.

Conclusion

4.1 By way of conclusion there are two points to make. First, the riots of August 2011 involved a whole range of events and it would be misleading to link all of them to questions about race and policing or wider issues such as racialised poverty and social and political exclusion. Yet at the same time it would be wrong to develop responses to the events that do not explore the possible links between race and outbreaks of collective violence. These linkages may have been little discussed in the context of the events of August 2011 but it remains important for us to include them in any analysis. Second, in thinking about future research agendas it is important that we move away from producing responsive accounts of collective violence once it has taken place and set in motion on-going research that helps us to understand both the underlying social and political conditions as well as the events that may spark specific acts of collective violence.

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