Relative Surplus Population and the London Riots

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Black August in Britain was marked by multiple crises, the news of each seeming to successively overwhelm the last, or at least to push it off front page news. There was the spectacle of hackergate, in which journalists from Rupert Murdoch’s News of the World, politicians of all stripes, and the police were finally revealed to be in collusion with each other after years of stonewalling. There was yet another panic on financial markets, as the non-stop risky and fraudulent behaviour of banks ran afoul of the fact that sovereign states could no longer bail them out through ever-more draconian austerity programs for which the poor have to pay the most. And then there were the ‘riots,’ the only crisis in which swift retributive punishments were handed out even before the loot could be sold. As Naomi Klein noted, there was looting in broad daylight by the super-elite, and looting at night by the dispossessed. Yet one group has been left quite undisturbed and still wields a powerful global voice. The other, that of the dispossessed, has been so swiftly criminalized that we have not even been allowed to hear what they have to say, or indeed, learn if they have anything to say at all. If only such treatment had been meted out to Philip Godwin or James Murdoch, then perhaps late British capitalism might have staved off its looming crises of legitimacy. And here, I suspect, lies the meaning of the swift, repressive hand of the English state in dealing with the ‘rioters.’

It is amazing to see how many articles have since been written about the ‘meaning’ of the riots without ever interviewing a single rioter. They have become invisible, criminalized beyond the reach of reason, rather like the category of ‘madness’ so deftly excavated by Foucault. And yet, the events in London were immediately preceded by a demonstration of a black man’s family and its supporters at the Tottenham police station, seeking to find out what had resulted in his killing by the police and being refused that basic courtesy. Those few ‘rioters’ who were interviewed in the early days, before the press stopped speaking to them, complained of continual stop and search procedures by police of young black men (racial profiling), the lack of jobs, a government that cared only for the rich, cutbacks and austerity that hit deprived communities most aggressively, and so on. Joined by dispossessed white youth as well, they talked about hopelessness, the venality at the
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top, and the need for money in England’s shining
global city. So did Darcus Hare, a 68-year old black
social justice advocate roughly shut down by a BBC
interviewer when he used the term ‘insurrection’ to
describe the events of August 7-11th. The rioters
seemingly took their cue from the bankers, who
looted England’s treasury and were rewarded. How
could such parallel behaviour at the top and the bot-
tom not have a political sub-text?

I happened to be staying in Notting Hill, doing
research at the British Library. Notting Hill was one
of the minor sites of this insurrection, to use Darcus
Hare’s term. I’d just stepped out to get my Oyster
card on Monday evening, and instead walked into
a wall of police cars streaming into the high street,
sirens wailing, a few hooded kids running away into
the no-exit alleys that police cars could not follow,
and, later, the sounds of windows smashing as the
police were called away to other sites and other scenes
of state breakdown, while the youths returned. The
‘rioters’ were much better organized and fleet-footed
than the police, and the simultaneous insurrections
dispersed across the city revealed the vulnerability of
the state at a time when the police itself was demoral-
ized by major cutbacks. The state lost total control
of the streets on August 8, and on August 9 the major
politicians were forced to return from their respective
holidays. Notting Hill was the scene of tremendous
tumults by West Indians in the 1980s when Brixton
and Tottenham also burned at the start of Thatcher’s
first austerity drive. It is also the venue of a famous
carnival that haunts historical memory as a sign of
its former black presence, now largely confined to
the northern part of the neighbourhood. The rest
of Notting Hill is now gentrified beyond belief and
certainly beyond the means of almost anyone but the
criminals at the top. Yes, many of the hooded youth
I saw were ‘black,’ and yes, they did loot mainly elec-
tronics stores in a former heartland of West Indian life
and culture in London. In a neighbourhood that now
houses hardly any black people, could this not also be
read as a retaking of spaces that they had been fiercely
excluded from by money-power in the post-Thatcher
years? In a city in which most of the public walkways
and parks have been privatized as well, could not con-
rol over the streets be a significant act of reclamation?

Certainly, there was evidence of fine-tuned orga-
nization of groups of through Blackberry Messenger
across the gentrified and not-so-gentrified spaces of
central London. The security of Blackberry’s mes-
saging service makes it the smart phone of choice
for the rebellious and the dissident, and not only for
CEOs. It is evident that not all of the ‘rioters’ lived in
the affected neighbourhoods and they appeared able
to amass and disperse at will. They utilized bicycles
that could navigate the no-exit lanes and alleyways
to hide in when police patrolled neighbouring high
streets. They then returned when the Metropolitan
Police were called out to other sites of conflagration.
Their simultaneous appearance in over fifty places in
Greater London on August 8 meant that they, and
not the government, controlled the streets. If noth-
ing else, the London ‘riots’ provided a model of how
urban insurrections can be successfully planned and
executed. For revealing this breach in state discipline,
they required the full and swift force of state retribu-
tion before anyone had time to think or even blink.
The irony of Cameron threatening to shut down the
internet, while disparaging Mubarak for doing the
same in Egypt in January, was lost in the rush to
criminalize and marginalize those who were framed
increasingly as pure criminals, lacking morality, and
symbols of ‘broken Britain.’ The unanswered ques-
tion here is who broke it?

Speaking objectively, many of the ‘rioters’ belong
to the burgeoning surplus population, a group with-
out jobs and futures, dispossessed of educational
and other state provisions, and existing beyond even
the functional needs of a reserve army of labour
(Smith 2011). This observation has been supported
by recent profiles of those caught: the vast majority
were not gang members, but rather those youth who
were unemployed and had ‘low educational attain-
ments.’ Their numbers are growing, both in the
recession-prone ‘advanced’ economies, and even in
the ‘fast-growing’ emerging countries, where they are
often referred to as ‘the informal sector,’ i.e. people
working in jobs that they have largely had to create
for themselves, at very low pay and with no benefits.
In India, strikingly, a 2007 government report noted
that 92 percent of the labouring population works in
this sector, and many economists there have referred
to the neoliberal phase as one of ‘jobless growth,’ while others argue that the massive growth in the informal sector represents a ‘distress sale of labour.’ In emerging countries, many of the dispossessed arise from an agrarian crisis, in which small holders have become pauperized or had their land appropriated for development purposes. In most neoliberalized countries, i.e. in most countries, this sector of the population is racialized as well. In India, adivasis, or aboriginal people, and dalits, or ex-untouchables, are over-represented in this surplus population and are usually the major victims of land appropriation or slum clearances. In England, it is black Britons who are the most disadvantaged. In France, it is the children of families from former French colonies in North Africa. In the U.S., one commentator has noted that the housing crisis represents the greatest appropriation of African American assets ever (Harvey 2009). This surplus population sees its future, realistically, as one of hopelessness. Is it any wonder that they take to guns in central India, or looting in fashionable Notting Hill?

Ignoring the big picture, liberal commentators on ‘the riots’ are prone to hegemonic appropriation, as even sympathetic journalists speak neoliberalism’s preferred language. For them, this is all about exclusion, as if stopping the riots was merely down to making people feel more culturally at home in multicultural Britain, or as if more neoliberalism were needed so that the ‘trickle-down’ effect would finally ‘include’ the majority. Such is the debasement of social science language in the past 30 years of post-Marxism. Yet, we must recognize this surplus population for what it is: an inevitable effect of a rising organic composition of capital in the face of a much-enlarged global proletariat, dispossessed from their land, jobs, futures, and any other assets and with nowhere to go and nothing to do. The insurrectionists of London, Birmingham and Bristol have already been criminalized and invisibilized. The adivasis of central India, likewise. What is next in the array of state repression for governments that have run out of ‘conventional means’ for dealing with the global slump and its surplus populations? Bodily rather than spatial ethnic cleansing?

REFERENCES
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