

## 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

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 bottom 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 demoralized 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 electronics 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 control over the streets be a significant act of reclamation?

Certainly, there was evidence of fine-tuned organization of groups of through Blackberry Messenger across the gentrified and not-so-gentrified spaces of central London. The security of Blackberry's messaging 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 nothing 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 retribution 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 question here is who broke it?

Speaking objectively, many of the 'rioters' belong to the burgeoning surplus population, a group without 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 attainments.' 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?

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