

## Does inexcusable mean incomprehensible?

### Another look at the Tottenham riots

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Analysing the Tottenham riots of August 2011 is complicated: the sensationalism of newspaper reporting results in speculation, and there has not yet been sufficient time for the publication of more reliable analytical studies<sup>1</sup>. Statements from politicians seem to a large degree to have been used for political purposes, either to enforce the notion of a “broken society” full of criminals who riot for a good time, or to deplore the Coalition spending cuts. I will here consider what appear to be the main analytical narratives concerning the riots. Having lived in Tottenham from the age of 7 until 18, I will occasionally add my own opinion, but will indicate this clearly.

#### “Pure criminality” vs. political statement

The most prominent discourse I have come across seems to be the ‘pure criminality’ vs. ‘political statement’ dichotomy, with the accompanying ‘pro rioters’ and ‘anti rioters’ stances. There has been much effort on the part of politicians to wholly depoliticise the Tottenham riots. In David Cameron’s first official statement, he claimed, “this is criminality, pure and simple, and it has to be confronted and defeated<sup>2</sup>”. His statement to the House of Commons reiterated this sentiment: the original protest by the family and friends of Mark Duggan was “used as an excuse by opportunistic thugs in gangs (...) It is completely wrong to say there is any justifiable causal link.”<sup>3</sup> The government has been reluctant to set up a public inquiry into the riots<sup>4</sup>, preferring instead to focus on punitive measures and its discourse of a broken society (although a “victims panel” has been established). This appears to reflect the sentiments of the British public: an Opinionium survey found that 69% of those questioned “believed that organised gangs taking advantage of the situation were the most important cause of the UK riots”, with 88% believing that the justice system is not tough enough on young offenders<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Studies currently underway include a collaboration between the Guardian newspaper and the London School of Economics, called *Reading the Riots*, and *Study of the August Riots in England*, which is being carried out by the National Centre for Social Research.

<sup>2</sup>Cameron, D. (a) ‘David Cameron’s full statement on the UK riots’, *The Guardian*, 09/08/11. Available at [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/09/david-cameron-full-statement-uk-riots](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/09/david-cameron-full-statement-uk-riots) (accessed 30/09/11)

<sup>3</sup>Cameron, D. (b) ‘Riots: David Cameron’s Commons statement in full’, *BBC News*, 11/08/09. Available at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14492789](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14492789) (accessed 30/09/11)

<sup>4</sup>Lewis, P. ‘Reading the Riots study to examine causes and effects of August unrest’, *The Guardian*, 05/09/11. Available at [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/05/reading-riots-study-guardian.lse](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/05/reading-riots-study-guardian.lse) (accessed 30/09/11)

<sup>5</sup>Opinium Research LLP. *Reaction to England Riots*, 18/08/11. Available at [www.news.opinium.co.uk/survey-results/reaction-england-riots](http://www.news.opinium.co.uk/survey-results/reaction-england-riots) (accessed 04/10/11)

The BBC in particular has come in for flack for its early reporting of the riots, in which it continued to use the word 'protesters' to describe participants<sup>6</sup>. There has equally been outrage at the attempts of some Labour MPs to identify causality between the riots and Coalition policies. But the analytical narrative of 'pure criminality' is contested.

In an entry to Reading University's *Reading Politics* blog, PhD student Ben Whitman posits that the violence was "intrinsic to a political-economic system which is predicated on inequality of wealth, on the exploitation of the working majority – many of whom live on or below the breadline – in the interests of a privileged minority social class." He argues that, for an action to be political, it does not need to be directly politically motivated. He calls for an expansion of the understanding of the political, currently restricted to "the actions and ideas of a select elite: politicians, NGOs, trade unions and so on", to include "all social action that is concerned with, or has implications for, power relations"<sup>7</sup>. In this analysis, rioters were making a political statement regarding the distribution of power, despite the fact that many of them may not have identified this themselves. Interestingly, this argument may in part be supported by the words of rioters themselves. Two teenage girls looting in Croydon, for example, explained to a BBC reporter that they were "showing the police and "the rich" that "we can do what we want"."<sup>8</sup> This provocative statement, whilst mindless and callous, indicates something of a power struggle, justified or otherwise.

### **Escaping the dichotomy**

But others have tried to escape the restriction of this dichotomy. In a video statement, the long time MP for Tottenham, David Lammy, managed to utterly condemn the actions of rioters, whilst also making reference to the wider context of injustice and inequality that cannot be ignored. He mentioned the "questions" which need to be asked, regarding why Tottenham erupted, as well as the fact that Tottenham was "a community that was already hurting"<sup>9</sup>. To me, this seems an important step in differentiating between act and person: for as long as we assign all participants the generic identity of 'criminal rioter', we will be unable to understand the

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<sup>6</sup> Halliday, J. 'London rioters are not 'protesters', admits BBC', *The Guardian*, 10/08/11. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/10/london-rioters-not-protesters-bbc> (accessed 06/10/11)

<sup>7</sup> Whitman, B. 'Responses to the London Riots: a Concerted Effort at Depoliticisation', *Reading Politics: A Blog of the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Reading*, 10/08/11. Available at <http://www.reading.ac.uk/blogs/readingpolitics/2011/08/10/responses-to-the-london-riots-a-concerted-effort-at-depoliticisation/> (accessed 28/09/11)

<sup>8</sup>BBC (a). 'London rioters: 'Showing the rich we do what we want'', *BBC News*, 09/08/11. Available at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14458424](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14458424) (accessed 19/10/11)

<sup>9</sup> Lammy, D. *Full four minute statement by David Lammy MP on Tottenham riot* (video) 07/08/11. Available at <http://www.davidlammy.co.uk/da/12244> (accessed 20/09/11)

multiple factors which led to the riots. I believe that this is incredibly important, especially considering the variety of people who participated in the riots. Whilst the action is condemnable, the people themselves are more than simply rioters, and although punishment may in many cases be utterly legitimate, we also need to identify why people behaved as they did. The majority of the causes identified below combine structural elements, such as those proffered by Whitman above, with more superficial elements, such as the sensationalism of media coverage of the riots.

What is it, then, about these particular circumstances that resulted in such a breadth of types of people behaving in such a way? There are numerous options to choose from. 'Social disadvantage' is a definite buzzword, embedded in which is the category of 'disadvantaged youth'. These buzzwords are used by both sides of the dichotomy: by the side inclined to see a political dimension, they are used in earnest; by others, they are sneered at as excuses doled out by the bleeding heart left to pardon people who ought not to be pardoned. But, in my opinion, it was likely that social disadvantage, particularly in the current economic and political climates, was one contributing factor to the Tottenham riots.

### **Does social disadvantage explain the riots?**

This is perhaps an appropriate moment to discuss Tottenham itself. Tottenham is just one part of the borough of Haringey. Within Haringey, 34.4% of the demographic, and up to 70% of its young people, are from an ethnic minority background<sup>10</sup>. Haringey has for a long time had an East/West split – the East, to which Tottenham belongs, is poorer and tends to be more populous than the West<sup>11</sup>, and locally has a much worse reputation in terms of crime, quality of schools, etc. The schools also have a higher proportion of children with little or no English. All of this makes Tottenham culturally rich, but it also creates a number of conflict fault lines. There is generally a certain level of crime and violence bubbling away under the surface of the society, and indeed above the surface as well. Statistics from 2010, measuring Haringey's Indices of Deprivation, show a marked difference between crime levels (based on reported acts of violence, burglary, theft and criminal damage) in the East and the West. Crime in both sides of the borough has increased since 2007, but again, this increase is concentrated in the East<sup>12</sup>. This

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<sup>10</sup>Great Britain (a). Haringey Council. 'People at the heart of change: our changing borough', in *Borough Profile*. London: London Borough of Haringey, 2008. Section 1.2. Available at [http://www.haringey.gov.uk/index/news\\_and\\_events/fact\\_file/boroughprofile.htm#ch1](http://www.haringey.gov.uk/index/news_and_events/fact_file/boroughprofile.htm#ch1) (accessed 10/10/11)

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* Section 1.4

<sup>12</sup> Great Britain (b). Haringey Council. *Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010: Headline Report for Haringey*. London: Policy, Intelligence and Partnerships, May 2011. Available at [www.haringey.gov.uk/index/news\\_and\\_events/fact\\_file/statistics/indicesofdeprivation.htm](http://www.haringey.gov.uk/index/news_and_events/fact_file/statistics/indicesofdeprivation.htm) (accessed 18/10/11)

would indicate that a significant number of participants in the Tottenham riots may have seen rioting as simply an extension of their normal behaviour. Statistics released in mid-September “back up claims by the justice secretary, Kenneth Clarke, that a “hardcore of the criminal classes” were involved in the riots”<sup>13</sup>: a report released in mid-october by the Home Office confirmed that, of those who had appeared before court by early September, 76% already had a previous conviction, 26% of whom had ten or more previous convictions<sup>14</sup>. 20% had spent time in jail. Interestingly, of offenders sentenced for an indictable crime in 2010/11, 35% had previously spent time in jail. The Ministry of Justice concludes on this point that, “while those taking part in the disorder were much more likely than the general population to have previous convictions, they are not quite as prolific as offenders for indictable offences in 2010/11”<sup>15</sup>. There are two points to make here: the first is that, whilst Tottenham is in no doubt home to a fair number of hardened criminals who participated in and possibly even quasi-organised the riots, not all rioters fit this bill. It is thus important to attempt to understand why more unexpected people participated. Second, the causes of crime themselves are complex, and call for further investigation, something which is beyond the scope of this piece of writing.

Unemployment in Tottenham is relatively high, measuring at 10.9% in December 2010 (the London average is 8.8%)<sup>16</sup>. The unemployment rates were mentioned by both David Lammy and Ken Livingstone<sup>17</sup> as factors relevant to understanding the events in Tottenham. Whilst unemployment cannot be an excuse for rioting (and to use it as such would be unfair to the many unemployed who did not riot), it is indicative of the wider context, especially given the fact that, across all riot hit areas, those appearing before the courts are “predominantly unemployed or students”<sup>18</sup>. Unemployment is also discussed by Bill Mitchell, Research Professor in Economics and Director of the Centre of Full Employment and Equity at the University of

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<sup>13</sup> Travis, A. and Ball, J. ‘Three-quarters charged over riots had previous criminal convictions’, *Guardian*, 15/09/11. Available at [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/15/three-quarters-rioters-criminal-convictions](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/15/three-quarters-rioters-criminal-convictions) (accessed 19/10/11)

<sup>14</sup> Great Britain (c). Home Office. *An Overview of Recorded crimes and Arrests Resulting From Disorder Events in August 2011*. London, October 2011, p 5. Available at [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/overview-disorder-aug2011/](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/overview-disorder-aug2011/) (Accessed 27/10/11)

<sup>15</sup> Great Britain (d). Ministry of Justice. *Criminal justice and sentencing statistics: Statistical bulletin on the public disorder of 6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> August 2011*. London, October 2011. Available at [www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/criminal-justice/public-disorder-august-11.htm](http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/criminal-justice/public-disorder-august-11.htm) (accessed 27/10/11)

<sup>16</sup> O’Leary, J. ‘London riots: does Tottenham have the highest unemployment in the capital?’, *Full Fact: promoting accuracy in public debate*, 08/08/11. Available at [http://fullfact.org/factchecks/Tottenham\\_unemployment\\_jobseekers\\_allowance-2906](http://fullfact.org/factchecks/Tottenham_unemployment_jobseekers_allowance-2906) (Accessed 10/10/11)

<sup>17</sup> Hill, D. ‘Ken Livingstone on riots, debt and the end of the world’, *Guardian*, 21/09/11. Available at [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/davehillblog/2011/sep/21/ken-livingstone-riots-debts-climate-change](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/davehillblog/2011/sep/21/ken-livingstone-riots-debts-climate-change) (accessed 28/09/11)

<sup>18</sup> Great Britain (c) *op. cit.*

Newcastle, Australia, in his blog, *Modern Monetary Theory...alternative economic thinking*<sup>19</sup>. He likens the living circumstances of many in Tottenham to those of the estate on which he grew up in the suburbs of Melbourne in the 1950s and 60s. He highlights a major difference, however; namely the economic policies of the Australian government at that that time, which focused on ensuring full employment. He writes of the estate's gangs, "They were violent, intolerant and ugly. But they only really caused havoc on Friday and Saturday nights because the rest of the time they were working courtesy of full employment." He deplores the shift in policies throughout the world, which have focused on inflation at the expense of employment. He argues,

"The concept of systemic failure has been replaced by sheeting the responsibility for economic outcomes onto the individual. Accordingly, anyone who is unemployed has chosen to be in that state either because they didn't invest in appropriate skills; haven't searched for available opportunities with sufficient effort or rigour; or have become "work shy" or too selective in the jobs they would accept."

A number of points can be drawn from this. The first echoes Ken Livingstone's remarks regarding work and a sense of pride, and accordingly unemployment and stigmatisation: the blame is shifted to the individual, meaning that long term unemployment or under-employment go hand in hand with long term stigmatisation, a potential factor in eroding a sense of community belonging and pride. The second is that a country's employment rate, if we are to believe Mitchell, is a decision made by government: long term unemployment and under-employment are thus indicative of long term prioritisation away from the workless. The third point is that unemployment, particularly concentrated unemployment in the kind of conditions experienced on estates, can lead to a chronic hopelessness, and through that to unrest.

Some have claimed that the unrest in Tottenham was caused by the spending cuts; indeed, many individuals and families will be hit hard in the coming months. This is also true in other riot-hit areas: the Ministry of Justice identified in its report, *Criminal Justice and Sentencing: Statistical bulletin on the public disorder of 6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> August*, that rioters appearing before the courts were disproportionately recipient of state benefits<sup>20</sup>. However, the timing of the riots, should we link them to spending cuts, something which many refuse to do, is interesting, given that the majority of cuts have not yet taken effect. Anecdotally, at least some residents of Tottenham and other affected areas had expected social unrest, as had several of "the relatively few academics and think-tankers who work in this field [, but the belief had been

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<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, B. 'I blame the British government for the riots', *Modern Monetary Theory...alternative economic thinking*, 10/08/11. Available at [www.bilbo.economicoutlook.net/blog/?p015605](http://www.bilbo.economicoutlook.net/blog/?p015605) (accessed 19/10/11)

<sup>20</sup> Great Britain (d). *op. cit.*

that this unrest would occur later,] perhaps in 2012-13 when the current cuts in public spending had really started to bite”<sup>21</sup>. Does this indicate that spending cuts and social disadvantage were unlikely causes of the riots? Research conducted in South America in the early 1990s found that social unrest is more highly associated with the run-up to austerity measures, but that, once the measures have been implemented, disturbances decline<sup>22</sup>. This would indicate that the immanent reductions in public spend *potentially* influenced the behaviour or attitudes of some people. However, the cuts alone do not sufficiently explain the disturbances.

Rogers sees a link between the unrest in England and the unrest elsewhere in the world this year, such as in Chile, Israel and Spain. He writes of the participants,

“Many of those involved belong to a generation of 16 – 30 year-olds who are experiencing or facing unemployment, and life-prospects that are far more limited than their elders. Their frustrations are further exacerbated by real anger at the ostentatious wealth of elites, especially bankers.”<sup>23</sup>

This echoes the sentiment of Whitman earlier, and is further discussed in relation to disadvantaged youth by Camilla Batmanghelidjh, founder of *Kids Company*. In an article for the *Independent*, she states, “First, violence and looting can never be justified. Second, for those of us working at street level, we’re not surprised by these events.”<sup>24</sup> She describes the kind of communities she works in, with their parallel economies driven by drugs and crime. The establishment is seen as unable to provide “fiscally efficient solutions”<sup>25</sup> to the poverty faced by families. But relying on an informal economy has its dangers. Again anecdotally, I was concerned, having heard about the riots in Tottenham, for the friends of my 15 year-old brother (who himself was not in London at the time). Despite not necessarily wanting to participate in rioting, many may well have been swept along, reluctant to single themselves out by refusing. A conversation with a police officer on the beat in neighbouring Waltham Forest confirmed my concerns as well founded – kids living in certain circumstances, on an estate in which loyalty to one’s own is highly valued, for example, can be left with very little choice in such situations. If this analysis were to be given credence, then we would have to seriously question the notion that it was “pure criminality” which drove the rioters. This is not to argue, however, that all

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<sup>21</sup> Rogers, P. ‘A time of riot: England and the world’, *Open Democracy*, 11/98/11. Available at [www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/time-of-riot-england-and-world](http://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/time-of-riot-england-and-world) (accessed 11/10/11)

<sup>22</sup> Ponticelli, Jacopo and Voth, Hans-Joachim, *Austerity and Anarchy: Budget Cuts and Social Unrest in Europe, 1919-2009* (July 31, 2011). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1899287> (accessed 04/10/11) p 5

<sup>23</sup> Rogers, P. *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Batmanghelidjh, C. ‘Caring costs – but so do riots’, *The Independent*, 09/08/11. Available at [www.independent.co.uk/opinions/commentators/camila-batmanghelidjh-caring-costs-ndash-but-so-do-riots-2333911.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/opinions/commentators/camila-batmanghelidjh-caring-costs-ndash-but-so-do-riots-2333911.html) (accessed 28/09/11)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

participants were there due to peer pressure – that would be illogical, given the variety of people who participated. Rather, it identifies the fact that *some* participants may have rioted for reasons outside of their own control. But even this is not, in my opinion, to say that all of these participants were necessarily unwilling. Indeed, much has been made of the fact that rioters seemed to be enjoying themselves. Instead, this analysis takes a step back from the riots themselves and attempts to consider why it is that certain people are in a situation in which rioting becomes an acceptable thing to do.

### **The need to examine the wider context**

People who have publically voiced the need to examine the social and political circumstances of riot-hit areas have been accused of attempting to excuse the inexcusable. Jo Tyabji, writing for *Open Democracy*<sup>26</sup>, has argued that it is not as clear-cut as this. She was part of a group, local to Peckham, who responded to rioting by creating a space for dialogue in the form of a ‘Why we love Peckham’ wall. Typing this phrase into a search engine will reveal photographs of a wall covered in post-it notes with messages written by local residents. Responses from the community varied: some were keen to express their feelings in this public way; others felt accused, as though the group were “drawing battle lines” and taking an anti-rioter stance. Still others felt that the space was not for them, particularly given the media attention it was receiving.

This issue of space and belonging is perhaps pertinent. The particular group of the unwilling mentioned in the article consisted of “several young men [who were] stood across the street from us, arms folded around their anger, muscles tensed to keep a hold of it”<sup>27</sup>. When Tyabji spoke with them, a number of issues arose, including stop and search and the feeling of being constant suspects in the eyes of the police. This is a sentiment I heard incredibly often at school, and also from my older brother at home. In school, young people of both genders felt harassed on the streets, simply for being who they are and living where they do. Groups of youth, for example, would gather in public parks and on the streets because that is where there is enough space for them. I do not deny that this can be intimidating for others in the area, or indeed that this behaviour is sometimes linked to criminality; rather, I emphasise the point that youth *sociality* is, as experienced by a large number of youths, perceived automatically to be youth *anti-sociality*. This point is further elaborated on in an article about knife crime and youth

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<sup>26</sup> Tyabji, J. ‘For or against the London riots? It’s not that simple’, *Open Democracy*, 10/08/11. Available at [www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jo-tyabji/for-or-against-london-riots-its-not-that-simple](http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jo-tyabji/for-or-against-london-riots-its-not-that-simple) (accessed 28/09/11)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

justice<sup>28</sup>. The author, in considering the direction the youth justice system has taken in recent years, claims that, “the predominant political discourse appears to have been to construct these youngsters as actual or possible offenders, rather than protecting their primary status of child or young person.”<sup>29</sup> This discourse has led to the use of stop and search, dispersal orders and the installation of high-pitched noises, audible only to youth, in public places to prevent gatherings and the criminality associated with them. This taking away of space, and its accompanying sense of blanket criminalisation, are resented by many young people, and do nothing to improve youth perceptions of the police. A discussion in my year 9 English class on this topic brought to light the fact that many of my classmates, upon seeing the police, pulled up their hoods and walked with a swagger, simply to irritate them. Why not, they reasoned, when they see us as criminals whatever we do? It seems to me that delineating space in this way, and creating real or perceived no-go areas for youth or sub-groups of youth, militarises police/community relations.

Discussions of wider police/community relations may seem to some to be a tangent, and thus irrelevant to understanding the Tottenham riots. Indeed, David Lammy has been careful to articulate the differences between the 2011 riots and the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985<sup>30</sup>, when there was “a particular relationship with the police”. But the fact that this riot was not necessarily directly linked to a police/community relationship does not, in my opinion, detract from the necessity of evaluating the relationship between youth and authority in the United Kingdom: the spark, after all, was the killing of a young black man by police, which was, rightly or wrongly, perceived as yet another attack on the community by at least some of its residents (the irony here of course being that the response to this ‘attack’ was itself an attack on the community). And whilst that particular relationship of 1985 may no longer be there, the police are perceived by many young people, and indeed older people, in Tottenham as discriminatory, racist and the enemy. As quoted at the head of the previously mentioned knife crime article,

“If a society cannot guarantee ‘the equal worth of all citizens’, mutual and self-respect and the meeting of basic needs, it cannot expect that all citizens will feel they have an equal stake in abiding by the law.”<sup>31</sup>

I would argue in this case that the *perception of equal worth* must accompany the *fact of equal worth*.

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen, D. ‘Time to stop twisting the knife: a critical commentary on the rights and wrongs of criminal justice responses to problem youth in the UK’, in *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 31:2, pp193 - 206

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p 198

<sup>30</sup> Lammy, D. *op. cit.* 1:36

<sup>31</sup> Stephen, D. quoting Cook, 2006. *op. cit.* p 193

## The role of gangs

An important narrative regarding youth and the riots is that of gangs and gang culture in the UK. David Cameron, in response, has promised a “concerted, all out war on gangs and gang culture”<sup>32</sup>. Again, public and private opinion was from the outset split regarding the role of gangs. The organisation of the rioters, with information spreading fast between networks, and a reported hierarchy similar to the hierarchy seen in drug dealing, supported the early assertion that gangs were the predominant actors in the riots<sup>33</sup>. Similarly, many residents and representatives of riot-affected areas reported the presence of groups of youth from elsewhere, come for the sole purpose of rioting and looting. All of the above may be true; however, there is also evidence that gangs were not causal to the extent that has been portrayed; the Home Office found that only 13% of arrestees by early September were affiliated to a gang (in London, this number rose somewhat to 19%)<sup>34</sup>. This is interesting, given the strong gang narrative given by the Prime Minister directly following the events. Many of the previous arguments regarding the criminalisation of youth in general can be applied here. Indeed, Hallsworth<sup>35</sup>, writing in 2004, has questioned the obsession he feels Britain is developing with gangs and gang culture. This article is relevant here, as it draws upon the importance of recognising the difference between the gang contexts of the US and the UK. Much has been made of the changes to policing strategies planned in response to the riots. In a single article, new Police Chief Constable Hogan-Howe was described as “tough”, “no-nonsense”, “hard-line” and “the scourge of liberal judges and soft sentencing”<sup>36</sup>: indicative of the ‘zero tolerance’ approach the government is adopting, based upon that implemented by Bill Bratton in New York City. The idea behind zero tolerance is to crack down on so-called “quality of life” offences, “sending the message that the police are present and able to enforce laws.”<sup>37</sup> This is in many ways a prevention strategy: strictly policed communities should, in theory, deter criminality. It is a policing strategy that sees the role of police restricted to the reduction of crime. Theresa May, the Conservative home Secretary, drew the distinction between this conception of policing and that advocated by former Shadow Home Secretary Ed Balls, who said, “policing isn’t “only about tackling crime”. “It’s not simply about

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in de Castella, T. ‘England riots: What’s the evidence gangs were behind the riots?’, *BBC News Magazine*, 16/08/11. Available at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14540796](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14540796)

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Great Britain (c). *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Hallsworth, S. ‘Getting Real About Gangs’, in *Criminal Justice Matters*, 55:1, 2004, pp12 – 13.

<sup>36</sup> Hill, D. (a) ‘Hogan-Howe: Super Bernard, stop and search’, in *Dave Hill’s London Blog*, 16/09/11.

Available at [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/davidhillblog/2011/sep/16/bernard-hogan-howe-media.myth-and-reality](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/davidhillblog/2011/sep/16/bernard-hogan-howe-media.myth-and-reality) (accessed 28/09/11)

<sup>37</sup> Ramirez, S. ‘The Zero-Tolerance Myth: Considering Evidence Based Policing Approaches in Post-Riot London’, in *Forward: Matters of Consequence*, 15/08/11. Available at [www.foreward.com.au/2011/08/the-zero-tolerance-myth-considering-evidence-based-policing-approaches-in-post-riot-london/](http://www.foreward.com.au/2011/08/the-zero-tolerance-myth-considering-evidence-based-policing-approaches-in-post-riot-london/) (accessed 28/09/11)

catching and convicting criminals”.”<sup>38</sup> As is usual concerning the riots, opinion is divided between those who see zero tolerance and tough sentencing as the only way forward in an amoral society and those who foresee further polarisation in communities, such as in Tottenham, which already experience difficult relationships between sectors of the society and the police. This amoral society argument has a number of important elements, a culture of entitlement being perhaps the most prominent. Labour and the Coalition government, and indeed many residents and representatives of affected areas, all point to a culture of wanting something for nothing as a driving force behind the looting. This can be linked to the welfare state and the abuse thereof, to the culture of suing which makes any act liable to be classed discriminatory, and to the assertion of “Rights without responsibilities”<sup>39</sup>. The similarities between the behaviour and motives of the rioters and that of those involved in a number of other recent scandals are also widely recognised, such as that of bankers before, during and after the financial crisis, British MPs with regard to their expenses, and those involved in the News of the World scandal.

### **The importance of differentiation**

What seems to become ever clearer is the importance of differentiation. When we talk or write of ‘the rioters’ or even ‘the riots’, we are painting with a broad brush a situation, or rather a set of situations, of infinite complexity. It is important to differentiate between why different people participated, particularly given that the riots were spread out over a number of days and locations. Thus, I would argue, the original riots fairly quickly lost their spontaneity, especially given the use of communications networks and the 24 hour, sensationalist media coverage. Those who arrived later may have been driven by a different set of factors to those who were there from the start, and the levels of opportunism may have risen as people were incentivised by seeing others<sup>40</sup>. Another important differentiation is that between ‘effective’ policing and ‘intolerant’ policing. One does not necessarily cancel out the other, but there has been much criticism of zero tolerance approaches, including from Bill Bratton himself<sup>41</sup>. The Waltham Forest policeman I spoke to is part of a scheme that engages with troubled youth in the area, including those who have already committed crime, by incorporating them into the police

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted by May, T. ‘Conservative values to fight crime and cut immigration’, 04/10/11. Available at [www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/10/May\\_Conservative\\_values\\_to\\_fight\\_crime\\_and\\_ut\\_immigration.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/10/May_Conservative_values_to_fight_crime_and_ut_immigration.aspx) (accessed 17/10/11)

<sup>39</sup> Cameron, D. (c) ‘We are all in this together’, 14/08/11. Available at [www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/08/David\\_Cameron\\_We\\_are\\_all\\_in\\_this\\_together.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/08/David_Cameron_We_are_all_in_this_together.aspx) (accessed 17/10/11)

<sup>40</sup> Dempsey, C. ‘Anatomy of a Networked Riot: rapid violence, rapid response’, *Open Democracy*, 13/09/11. Available at [www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/catherine-dempsey/anatomy-of-a-networked-riot-rapid-violence-rapid-response](http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/catherine-dempsey/anatomy-of-a-networked-riot-rapid-violence-rapid-response) (accessed 28/08/11)

<sup>41</sup> Hill, D. (a) *op. cit.*

cadets. It is far from easy, and chances of success are reduced by the fact that many of these youths are living in an anti-police environment. But the alternative, further entrenching the divide between police and community, seems even less likely to de-polarise the relationship. Through reaching out to the very people so antagonistic to the police (and indeed antagonised by the police), there is a possibility of improving mutual perceptions.

### **The role of social media**

The role of social media in causing or prolonging the riots is yet another topic requiring differentiation, in this case between the tools themselves (smart phones, BBM) and the people using those tools. The importance of social media is disputed. During the riots, there were considerations about whether networks such as Twitter or BBM ought, for security reasons, to be temporarily switched off: the story of two young men arrested and charged for inciting violence over Facebook is by now well known. Tabloids were also highlighting the role of social media, and publishing messages clearly intended to prolong the rioting and looting<sup>42</sup>. However, analysis of Twitter feeds has indicated “little evidence of organization” and Dr Chris Greer, senior lecturer in sociology and criminology at London’s City University has said that, whilst technology may “have helped rioters organize themselves once on the streets [...] it was unlikely that the technology incited people to violence.”<sup>43</sup> In regards to longer-term monitoring or censoring of social media as a preventative against such outbreaks of violence, Ponticelli and Voth found in their study, *Austerity and Anarchy: Budget Cuts and Social Unrest in Europe, 1919 – 2009*, that, “If anything, higher levels of media availability and a more developed telecommunications infrastructure reduce the strength of the mapping from budget cuts to instability.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Voices from Tottenham**

This discussion has so far left fairly untouched the topic of Mark Duggan and the protest outside Tottenham police station. The details of the case are obscure, which itself led to a lot of anger in the community. An interesting narrative is presented in a video made by residents of

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<sup>42</sup> e.g. Flynn, B. ‘Roll up and loot: Rioting thugs use Twitter to boost their numbers in thieving store raid’, in *The Sun*, 08/08/11. Available at [www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/3738786/Tottenham-riot-thugs-use-twitter.html](http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/3738786/Tottenham-riot-thugs-use-twitter.html) (accessed 19/10/11)

<sup>43</sup>Periscope. ‘How BBM, Twitter and Facebook may – or may not – have had a role in the London riots’, *The Periscope Post* [online], 08/09/10. Available at [www.periscopepost.com/2011/08/how-bbm-twitter-and-facebook-may-or-may-not-have-had-a-role-in-the-london-riots/](http://www.periscopepost.com/2011/08/how-bbm-twitter-and-facebook-may-or-may-not-have-had-a-role-in-the-london-riots/) (accessed 19/10/11)

<sup>44</sup> Ponticelli, J. and Voth, H-J. *op. cit.* p 4

Tottenham<sup>45</sup>. Whilst this video was created by and for the *Tottenham Defence Fund* and will by no means represent the views of all residents in affected areas, it is important to try to understand events as perceived by those who experienced them first hand. This story of how the riots unfolded brings to light the anger felt following the death of Mark Duggan. The original, peaceful demonstration was handled badly, by both the police and David Lammy, MP. A comparison was made between the police officer responsible for the recent death of his dog from overheating in a car, followed by calls for dismissal, and the police officer responsible for killing Mark Duggan<sup>46</sup>, who was protected behind a fabricated story. It is also important to note that Mark Duggan's family called for the violence to stop<sup>47</sup>The descriptions of that first evening are very different to those portrayed by the mass media: a spirit of community and solidarity was depicted, with shop owners distributing bread to hungry residents. Destruction began in the form of igniting two police cars, which were allowed to burn. Interviewees in this film described a sense that the lack of police (or indeed fire brigade) response was interpreted as 'let Tottenham burn'. The knocking down of a young woman by the police was identified as the spark that began the riot in earnest. What is clear throughout the film is that, in the eyes of the interviewees, the events of that first night were seeped in history. What came afterwards is not covered in the video, although some commentators continued with the rhetoric of "our brave kids on the frontline"<sup>48</sup>. It seems to me that this rhetoric rapidly loses any justification it may have had as the events distanced themselves further from the original demonstration.

## Conclusion

Depending on the chosen analysis, the shooting of Mark Duggan was a trigger for the release of pent up anger at our country's political and economic structures, for mindless bad behaviour and violence at the expense of others' safety, or perhaps, and more likely, a combination of both and more. What is clear is that there is no consensus, and most likely won't be: the in-depth analytical studies currently being undertaken will be welcome to anyone who wishes to understand how something so devastating could take place. Also apparent is that, with a few exceptions, all commentators condemn the riots themselves – this is right, as such violence and disregard for the safety and integrity of others is inexcusable. But equating inexcusability with incomprehensibility runs the risk of missing those causal factors that were preventable, and thus the risk of a similar thing occurring in the future. This post-riot period provides an

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<sup>45</sup>Tottenham Defence Campaign. *Rebellion in Tottenham 2011* (video). Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Faysa6h0IR8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Faysa6h0IR8) (accessed 20/10/11)

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 09:15

<sup>47</sup> e.g. Wilson, S. (Fiancee). *Partner of shot Mark Duggan speaks out* (video). Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR97Wxgl7fQ> (accessed 14/10/11)

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* e.g. 24:44

opportunity to address some issues crucial to our peaceful co-existence: what are the moral foundations of British society? At what point do we - as individuals, politicians, voters, youth, elderly, teachers, communities - decide to take a stand against injustice, be that against bankers' bonuses or looters within our communities? Who are our communities there to serve? Much has been made of the timing of these riots, so close to the Olympic Games as they are - is that really the most concerning issue? These are questions for us to answer in all our many participatory roles in our communities; the alternative - brushing the questions under the carpet - cannot suppress them for long.

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