

The Neoliberal State and the 2011 English Riots: A Class Analysis

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“The Left has allowed the Right to get away with the lie that, because there is no longer an industrial working class, socialism is irrelevant. That’s a stupid argument. There is a working class; it just looks very different. We need to know what it looks like and we haven’t been very good at doing that. One of the greatest successes of neoliberal capitalism in Europe and North America has been to dis-educate people about class.People have lost the language to talk about themselves as working class, but not totally. For those of us who work through the word, it’s very important to talk about the ‘working class’ because it connects to people’s experiences under austerity, budget cuts, fiscal crisis, and so on. These measures are all aimed at the working class.”

Neil Smith (2011).

On 11th August 2011 in Camberwell Green Magistrates Court, a 23-year-old student with no criminal record was sentenced to a prison term of six months for stealing a pack of bottled water worth £3.50. This extraordinarily harsh sentence would normally be cause for widespread denunciation of judicial abuse but, following five nights of fiery rioting across a dozen English cities from 6th to 10th August, the extraordinary turned ordinary for the courts. Whereas the rampant financial criminality at the top of the class structure leading to the near-collapse of the banking system in the autumn of 2008 saw no reactions from criminal justice even as it sent the UK economy into a tailspin, overturning millions of lives and causing hundreds of billions of pounds in damage¹, street fracas at the bottom estimated to have cost around 300 million pounds triggered a lightning-fast and brutal response from the penal wing of the state. Those convicted at the Crown Court of robbery (that is, looting, however minor) during these nocturnal disturbances were sentenced with stunning celerity to an average of 29.8 months in prison, nearly treble the usual rate of 10.8 months; culprits of violent disorder reaped 30.6 months compared with the standard fare of 9.9 months, while those nabbed for theft received sentences nearly twice as long (10.1 months as against 6.6 months).² After the riots stopped, the police deployed munificent resources and manifold schemes to track down and round up the looters, mining television footage and web postings, setting up phone lines for snitching, running “Shop A Moron” posters on buses, while politicians promised to cut welfare and housing benefits to the families of the culprits.

Set against the political backdrop of steep state retrenchment and relentless invocation of personal responsibility, dramatic scenes of burning buildings, of bands of hooded and masked youths pillaging stores, and of thousands of police patrolling major streets in riot gear were bound to trigger rash statements and knee-jerk government reaction. At the height of the riots as well as in their immediate aftermath, anyone attempting to formulate an explanation of the disorders other than a behavioural one was stridently denounced as effectively condoning or supporting rioting³. Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, embodied this posture when, upon being heckled by angry shopkeepers and frightened residents on the streets of Clapham, he responded: “It’s time we heard a little bit less about the sociological justifications for what is in my view nothing less than wanton criminality.” As incidents spread to several London districts, and then to other cities of England,

¹ A damning account of the contribution of systematic illegal behavior to the financial bubble burst of 2008 is Charles H. Ferguson’s award-winning documentary, *The Inside Job* (2010). The main reaction of the British government was to roll out a rescue package topping 500 billion pounds, lest the banking system disintegrate.

² These figures come from Ministry of Justice (2012).

³ One illustration: the BBC was forced to issue an apology following its 9th August interrogation of the veteran broadcaster Darcus Howe. When Howe stated that he was not shocked by the riots, which in his view were an “insurrection” reflecting “the nature of the historical moment”, the interviewer immediately accused him of being a rioter with a criminal past.

“criminality,” of either the “pure” or the “copycat” variety, quickly became the commonsense reason given for their occurrence, one that circulated freely amongst police chiefs, politicians across party divides, and the mainstream media.

This essay starts from the opposite premise to that of Boris Johnson’s, in that we need not less but more social science to shed light on the riots of 2011, and elucidate their political import. To do this I trace a double nexus. First, I re-place the swift deployment of punitive action and discourses in response to the riots within *the broader reengineering of the state* according to a neoliberal blueprint of austerity (especially social welfare reduction) and penal expansion. Second, I connect these eruptions to urban marginality in British society and pay close attention to the *symbolic defamation* of urban dwellers at the bottom of the class structure and of the places where they live.

The Structural Violence of Austerity

The urban unrest of the summer of 2011 began on 6th August, following a peaceful evening protest outside a police station on Tottenham High Road in London at the 4th August police killing of Mark Duggan, a father-of-four aged 29⁴. Duggan grew up and lived on the Broadwater Farm housing estate in Tottenham, a place deeply stigmatized since a serious outbreak of rioting in 1985 in response to the death of a woman whose home was being searched by the police, and still a place where young black people are “eight times more likely to be stopped and searched [by the police] than their white counterparts” (Connolly, 2011). Not long after the protest at Duggan’s death concluded, a 16 year-old girl approached police officers to voice her anger, and was allegedly beaten back with batons (Eddo-Lodge, 2011). Two police cars, a bus and several shops were then attacked, looted and set ablaze in Tottenham, and the anger soon spread to nearby Wood Green. In the three nights that followed, rioting occurred across Greater London, in (inter alia) Enfield, Brixton, Hackney, Peckham, Clapham, Ealing and Croydon. Outside the capital, rioting occurred first in Birmingham (8th August), and later in Leeds, Bristol, Manchester, Salford, Nottingham, Gloucester and Liverpool, with smaller disturbances in several other cities. In the end, 3103 people were brought before the courts, of which 2138 were convicted and sentenced. Court data show that a majority of those tried were young (74% aged no older than 24), male (89%), and with a previous caution/conviction (73%). A majority live in areas classified in government databases as ‘multiply deprived’ (and 66% of those areas became even more deprived between 2007 and 2010).⁵

⁴ The exact circumstances of Duggan’s death remain unclear, but on 12th August 2011 the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), with customary obliquity, announced that it ‘may’ have given misleading information to journalists that shots were fired between Duggan and the police – significantly fanning the flames of that week. The official verdict, months later, was that Duggan was armed at the time he was stopped by the police, but never once fired his gun and in fact discarded it well before he was fatally shot in the back. After numerous delays, a public inquest took place from late 2013 to early 2014, and on 8th January a jury delivered its conclusion (an 8–2 majority) that Duggan’s death was a “lawful killing” by the police, even though the judge in the case instructed the jury as follows: “If you are sure that he did not have a gun in his hand, then tick the box ‘unlawful killing’” (Press Association, 2013).

⁵ Data from <http://www.newstatesman.com/voices/2014/08/danny-dorling-mapping-august-2011-riots>

Numerous commentaries from high-profile intellectuals were penned in the immediate aftermath of the uprising. Many were helpful in the context of ludicrous political bleating of ‘criminality’ as the cause, of swirling mythology and of numerous preposterous explanations (such as the assertion that *BlackBerry Messenger* was somehow *responsible* for what happened). One that received wide circulation and attention was Zygmunt Bauman’s (2011) characterization of rioters as “defective and disqualified consumers” seeking prized items (electrical goods, smartphones, trainers) to avoid “the wrath, humiliation, spite and grudge aroused by not having them”.⁶ Bauman argued that *social dignity* is the most prized possession of all, and that a life of “non-shopping is the jarring and festering stigma of a life unfulfilled.” However, as Sutterluty (2014) has since reminded us:

“The fact that a large number of public buildings – police stations, sport centers, municipal institutions and in a few cases schools – were attacked by the rioters was somewhat ignored by media reports, which tended to focus on the looting of businesses....[T]he reference to a culture of consumption can hardly explain why the riots began and why the first and ongoing targets of attack were the police and their institutions.” (p.40, p.45)

Slavoj Zizek (2011) was much more simplistic than Bauman when he described what happened as “abstract negativity” and “meaningless violence” (echoing comments made by conservative politicians and right wing tabloid journalists). Similarly, Richard Sennett and Saskia Sassen (2011) offered this perspective:

“An old-fashioned Marxist might imagine that the broken windows and burning houses expressed a raging political reaction to government spending cuts — but this time that explanation would be too facile.Today, the rioters seem motivated by a more diffuse anger, behaving like crazed shoppers on a spree; while some of the shops looted are big chains, many more are small local businesses run by people who are themselves struggling through Britain’s economic slump. There has been a change in national temperament that has affected decent citizens as well as criminals. The country’s mood has turned sour. Indeed, the flip side of Britons’ famed politeness is the sort of hooliganism that appears at soccer matches and in town centers on weekend nights - an unfocused hostility that is usually fueled by vast quantities of alcohol.”

To be sure, rioters looted stores, but they also targeted directly the institutions and symbols of the state. These were not, contrary to what many believe (and what has arguably become hegemonic thought on August 2011), ‘issueless riots’ (see Sutterluty, 2014, p.44 for a piercing critique of this notion).

Since the late 1970s Britain has been subjected to an extraordinary (and apparently unfinished) neoliberal revolution, and the British ruling class has been at the centre of the neoliberal revolution that has swept unevenly throughout the globe. This is very well documented in an extensive international literature; but what began as a radical series of policy shifts towards privatization (a systematic assault on the Keynesian welfare state and on labour unions) has mutated into what Tickell and Peck (2003) helpfully call “the mobilization of state power in the contradictory extension and reproduction of market (-like) rule” (p.166). An ugly triad of economic deregulation, welfare state retraction, and penal expansion (*laissez-faire* in the economic register at the top, and anything but *laissez-faire* on the social register at the bottom) produced by continuous statecraft (i.e. the state as a political process in motion, not a lumbering bureaucratic monolith) has fundamentally reshaped social relations from above, and led many to believe and

⁶ <http://beinghumanthesedays.com/zygmunt-bauman-on-the-london-riotszygmunt-bauman-on-the-london-riots/>

defend passionately the myth that economic growth is all that matters to a society as wealth will ‘trickle-down’ and benefit everyone. In the 1990s this logic was embraced by numerous political parties across Europe with roots in social democratic and/or left-wing movements and positions. With very little room for manoeuvre after the free market, low-taxation, inflation-busting fanaticism of the 1980s, these parties all turned neoliberal. The prime illustration of such a party is the UK Labour Party, in power from 1997-2010 under the masterful spin capacity for populist reform demonstrated by Tony Blair and his senior advisors. Among the many destructive legacies of this period is a truly abysmal record of income inequality (Dorling, 2010) – every available measure on almost every possible indicator shows that the rich became much richer and the poor became poorer during these 13 years. Even some of the Labour Party’s strongest supporters felt cheated, and in Scotland (historically a Labour stronghold) they simply deserted it for the Scottish National Party (adding significant momentum to the recently failed Scottish independence movement, which, of course, is another story).

The 2011 English riots took place just one year after a Coalition government came to power in Britain following an election which did not yield a clear majority for any party. That Coalition is a skewed alliance between the dominant Conservative Party (which campaigned using the language of compassion and social progress to shield the electorate from its rabidly right wing, ruling class and corporate ethos); and the subordinate Liberal Democrats (a small set of centre-right political lightweights without a coherent message or set of policies). The new Prime Minister, David Cameron, and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne (both members of the British aristocracy with substantial family fortunes, who have surrounded themselves with many more such people) arrived in office during a global financial crisis, and were confronted by a substantial budget deficit which they argued was a consequence of reckless and irresponsible public spending by the previous Labour government (they even attribute the entire global financial crisis to the actions of that Labour government too, at any opportunity). For Cameron and Osborne, two archdeacons of low taxation and low public spending, there was only one way to deal with this budget deficit: a vicious austerity package, which, conveniently, was also an opportunity to destroy the welfare state that ‘Thatcher’s children’ of the Conservative Party so despise, and replace it with their dream of a thoroughly privatized and individualized society which would protect the sanctity of private property rights and a free market. Symbols of the Fordist-Keynesian era such as the welfare state are viewed by the Conservative Party as “dangerous impediments to the advancement of financialisation” (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2013, p.20). To continue the relentless pace of expanding global accumulation, British ruling elites have set out to monitor and monetize more and more of those human needs that were not commodified in previous rounds of financialization. Pensions, healthcare, education, and especially housing have been more aggressively appropriated, colonized and financialised (Meek, 2014). For Conservatives, the redistributive path - increasing taxation of corporations, land and property (London in particular is known as a tax haven for foreign investors in land and property) – is not a matter for public discussion, and an entire cadre of cultural-technical experts (chief among them economists, lawyers, think tank researchers and communications professionals) is in place to make sure the conversation does not head in that direction. This ensures that it is largely unknown that an estimated £120 billion a year is lost in the UK due to corporate tax avoidance, evasion, and collection errors. Just the money through tax avoidance alone could pay for 25,000 nurses on a

£24,000 a year salary for 20 years; could put 129,000 children through school from ages 5-18; and would allow the government to give every single pensioner in the UK an extra £65 a year.⁷

If we take a closer look at the systematic assault on the welfare state in Britain, we can move a step closer towards understanding the shared indignity and dishonour among people who feel abandoned and betrayed. Table 1 presents a summary of the welfare reforms and cuts that have taken place in Britain since 2011 (that these cuts were all being mooted by politicians with such enthusiasm that year goes some way towards explaining the anger of that summer). Even after a quick glance at these cuts, it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that austerity is, quite simply, structural violence against the working class.

⁷ <http://leftfootforward.org/2013/09/another-crackdown-on-benefit-fraud-yet-it-accounts-for-just-0-7-per-cent-of-welfare-budget/>

TABLE 1: A SUMMARY OF WELFARE REFORMS AND CUTS

The cuts affect all aspects of government expenditure including education, health, legal aid and welfare services. This is a summary of the cuts most likely to affect low-income households:

BENEFIT CAP trialled from 15th April 2013, introduced to Scotland 15th July 2013

- Saving: £275 million in 2013-14
- 56,000 households affected at an average loss of £93/week
- Cap on the total amount of benefit that working-age people (16-64) can receive (approximately £350 per week for a single adult, and £500 per week for a couple or lone parent regardless of the number of children they have)
- Set at the average earnings of a UK working household, the cap will mean that people of working age will receive up to a maximum amount, even if their full entitlement is higher.

SPARE ROOM SUBSIDY ("BEDROOM TAX") introduced 1st April 2013

- Saving £409 million in 2013-14
- 660,000 claimants to be affected, at an average loss of £14/week
- Those with one spare bedroom will lose 14% of their housing benefit
- Those with two or more spare bedrooms will lose 25%.
- Up to two children (of the same gender) under the age of 16 are expected to share
- Families with severely disabled children, foster carers and families of armed services personnel will be exempt.
- A year on, only 6% of social housing tenants affected have moved home, whilst 28% of affected tenants have fallen into rent arrears.

UNIVERSAL CREDIT trialled from April 2013, initially intended to be rolled-out in three phases between 2013 and 2017

- Initial cost estimates totalled £100 million; due to delays and setbacks, more recent estimates stand at £2.4bn
- 3.1 million households will be entitled to more benefits, at an average gain of £16/month
- While 2.8 million households will be entitled to less
- It will combine: Income support; Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA); Income-related Employment Support Allowance (ESA); Housing Benefit; Child Tax Credit; Working tax Credit
- Roll-out has been severely delayed due to major IT problems and internal government friction.
- As of December 2013, more than £40m has been written off on software and computing costs. Whilst, roll out to at least 700,000 ESA claimants is due to be delayed beyond the 2017 schedule.

REPLACING DISABILITY ALLOWANCE (DLA) WITH PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENTS (PIP)

- Saving: £2,240 million.
- Introduction of more stringent medical test and regular retesting.
- Reduction in number of payment categories.
- 170,000 claimants, one fifth of current DLA claimants, expected to be ineligible for PIP. By 2018, 500,000 will be ineligible.
- 150,000 will get a higher award, according to the DWP. By 2018, 780,000 will receive the same or more than they do currently.

REPLACING INCAPACITY BENEFITS WITH EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT ALLOWANCE (ESA)

- Introduction of ESA for new claimants from October 2008. Existing incapacity claimants to be assessed from autumn 2010.
- A new, tougher medical test: the Work Capability Assessment (WCA).
- New conditionality for ESA Work Related Activity Group – claimants are subject to sanctioning

BENEFIT RISES CAPPED AT 1%, below-inflation

- 4.1 million households affected by an average loss of £0.90 a week
- 9.6 million households will be affected by 2014-15 losing on average of £3 a week

COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT,

- Replacing it with an alternative fund at 90% of the previous budget, from April 2013
- Is likely to affect 3.1 million English households with an average loss of £138 per year.
- In Scotland and Wales, devolved administrations have prevented the reduction from falling on claimants

CHANGES TO ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA TO RECEIVE LEGAL AID

- Eligibility to claim legal aid was capped at a household income of £32,000
- Those earning between £14,000 and £32,000 will have to take a means test.
- Family law cases including divorce, child custody, immigration and employment cases were expected to be badly affected.
- Savings: a minimum £350m from £2.2bn legal aid bill.

Source: Roberts (2014)

The remarkable Guardian-LSE research project *Reading the Riots* contains interview data which supports the argument that violence ‘from below’ in the form of rioting was a response to structural violence ‘from above’ (cf. Wacquant, 2008, p.24). 270 people who participated in the rioting were interviewed, and some of the quotations in the final report are telling:

“You see the rioting yeah? Everything the police have done to us, was in our heads. That’s what gave everyone their adrenaline to want to fight the police... It was because of the way they treated us.”

“I became involved in the riots in Salford because it was a chance to tell the police, tell the government, and tell everyone else for that matter that we get fucking hacked off around here and we won’t stand for it.”

“I think some people were there for justice for that boy who got killed. And the rest of them because of what’s happening. The cuts, the government not doing the right thing. No job, no money. And the young these days needs to be heard. It’s got to be justice for them.”

“When no one cares about you you’re gonna eventually make them care, you’re gonna cause a disturbance.”

“I’ve gone past caring. Just think there’s no point in me wishing, wanting things to happen.”

Alert to a mostly forgotten but massively important precedent for the riots (the late-2010 student protest at the introduction of tuition fees in England), Paul Gilroy (2013) dissected the verdict of “mindless violence” as follows:

“The depth of the neoliberal revolution that Britain had undergone during the three intervening decades was conveyed above all by the way that the new norms specified by generalized individuation and privatization were able to reframe the disorders as a brisk sequence of criminal events and transgressions that could be intelligible only when seen on the scale of personal conduct.” (p.555)

As Imogen Tyler (2013a) has summarised, “Contrary to claims that these riots were ‘senseless’, many of those participants interviewed described the riots as an opportunity to air grievances (against the police and the government). However misguided their actions, they wanted their experiences of unemployment, poverty, inequality and injustice to be recognized.” (p.7) Sutterluty (2014) draws the same conclusion when he argues that the riots were in large part “a reaction to the violation of civic claims to equality” from young people with almost no political representation (a product of the collapse and disappearance of traditional workers’ parties). As he continues, it was ultimately because of this violation that state institutions such as the police and the school system - through their routine functioning - generated such massive rage and disappointment and were targeted for attack. This does not, of course, explain the looting of stores, but to a considerable degree it accounts for why so many young people took to the streets.

On 15th August, Gilroy spoke with poignant eloquence about the riots at a community meeting in Tottenham.⁸ He reflected upon the 1981 riots in several British cities, and identified several contrasts in respect of the situation three decades later (now extended and elaborated in Gilroy, 2013). Arguably his most useful analytical assertion was that “the difference between 1981 and now is that the relationship between *information* and *power* has been changed, and our tactics for understanding our defence of our communities have to take those changes into account.” It is

⁸ <http://dreamofsafety.blogspot.com/2011/08/paul-gilroy-speaks-on-riots-august-2011.html>

instructive to consider this assertion in light of the heightening stigmatization of working class people and the places where they live, to which I now turn.

Symbolic Defamation: The Myth of the ‘Broken Society’

On the same day that Gilroy spoke in Tottenham, David Cameron visited a youth centre in his rural Witney constituency to deliver a speech outlining his Coalition government’s response to the riots⁹. He began by arguing that “these riots were not about poverty” but rather “about behaviour. People showing indifference to right and wrong. People with a twisted moral code. People with a complete absence of self-restraint.” To confront what he sees as a “slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations”, he outlined his “personal priority” in politics: “to mend our broken society”. Particular emphasis was placed on “turning around the lives of the 120,000¹⁰ most troubled families in the country”:

“I don’t doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home. Perhaps they come from one of the neighbourhoods where it’s standard for children to have a mum and not a dad, where it’s normal for young men to grow up without a male role model, looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger.”

He went on to outline that a “social fightback” should be centered around fixing a welfare system that “encourages the worst in people”:

“[There] is a moral hazard in our welfare system - people thinking they can be as irresponsible as they like because the state will always bail them out. ... I want us to look at toughening up the conditions for those who are out of work and receiving benefits and speeding up our efforts to get all those who can work back to work. Work is at the heart of a responsible society.”

The story behind the rhetoric of a ‘broken society’ full of troubled families is a pure exemplar of the truncation and distortion of public understanding in respect of the ongoing articulation of poverty, social class and space in British society. The rhetoric did not begin with Cameron, but rather with the publications of a right-wing think tank, the *Centre for Social Justice* (CSJ), the brainchild of his Secretary of State for Work and Pensions: the self-proclaimed ‘quiet man’, Iain Duncan-Smith.

During his tortured tenure (2001-2003) as Conservative Party leader, Duncan-Smith visited one of the poorest urban areas of the UK: Easterhouse in Glasgow, which he described as “a wrecked and dreadful set up...with families locked into generational breakdown” (quoted in Derbyshire, 2010)¹¹. In 2004, in an effort to get the ‘modernising’ Conservatives to enter the electorally significant *terra incognita* of poverty and welfare, Duncan-Smith established the CSJ with this mission statement:

⁹ <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots/>

¹⁰ Quite where this figure came from is still a mystery. For a very detailed catalogue of the eugenic mentality of civil servants who think they can fix Britain’s “troubled families”, and of the abuse of statistics and general skulduggery that underpins the entire troubled families agenda, see the excellent work of Stephen Crossley at <https://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/>

¹¹ He has on many occasions spoken of this visit a life-changing experience, “a sort of Damascene point” (*ibid.*).

“To put social justice at the heart of British politics and to build an alliance of poverty fighting organisations in order to see a reversal of social breakdown in the UK.”

Whilst a brief visit to its website leaves one bombarded by two words: “breakdown” and “broken”, nowhere on it or in any of its publications can a definition of ‘social justice’ be found. Only in a 2010 interview in the *New Statesman* does Duncan-Smith attempt to define it: “I mean to improve the quality of people’s lives, which gives people the opportunity to improve their lives. In other words, so people’s quality of life is improved.” (quoted in Derbyshire, 2010).

In 2006 the CSJ produced a voluminous document entitled *Breakdown Britain*¹², the end-product of Duncan-Smith being invited by Cameron “to consider how an incoming Conservative Government could tackle Britain’s most acute social problems.” (p.13) Duncan-Smith convened five working groups to conduct surveys and report back on five “pathways to poverty”¹³: “family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependency and worklessness, severe personal debt and addiction to drugs and alcohol” for “if the drivers of poverty are not addressed an ever-growing underclass will be created” (*ibid.*) Considerable attention was given to “family breakdown” in particular, and the central tenets of the infamous ‘underclass’ thesis lie in the CSJ’s definition of familial strife:

“We have adopted an inclusive use of the term ‘family breakdown’ which can be summed up in three key words: dissolution, dysfunction, and ‘dad-lessness’.” (p.29)

Peck (2006) notes how think tank conservatives “portray themselves as lonely voices of reason, as principled outsiders in a corrupt, distracted, and wrongheaded world” (p.682). This captures precisely the tenor of the Breakdown Britain report, especially on “family breakdown”:

“The policy-making community (which includes politicians, policy-makers and academics) has been markedly reluctant to grasp the nettle of family breakdown by being clear about the benefits of marriage and committed relationships, and the merits of supporting and encouraging them. (p.29)

In a series of papers, Gerry Mooney and colleagues (Mooney, 2009; Mooney and Neal, 2010; Mooney and Hancock, 2010; Gray and Mooney, 2011) have provided an insightful interrogation of ‘Broken Britain’ rhetoric, from its roots in stigmatised eastern Glasgow, to its electoral significance (‘Broken Britain’ was pivotal to the Conservatives’ 2010 General Election campaign, propped up by the Rupert Murdoch tabloids), and now to its contemporary public policy undercurrent where “marriage and a stable two-parent family life are key to mending Broken Britain and thereby reducing levels of poverty.” (Mooney and Neal, 2010: 145) For the CSJ, there is no social problem for which promoting marriage is not the solution. It is desperate to guard against any views to the contrary; for example, when a distinguished welfare historian argued that the CSJ present a misleading and empirically inaccurate portrait of a British past filled with

¹² It was later followed by a package of ‘policy recommendations’ entitled “Breakthrough Britain”, with numerous sub-reports focusing on particular cities: Breakthrough Manchester, Breakthrough Glasgow, Breakthrough Birmingham, etc.

¹³ These ‘pathways’ are notable for how they reverse social causation in pushing behavioural explanations for poverty. For example, never mind that a massive literature on financial exclusion confirms that poverty is a pathway to ‘serious personal debt’ – the Centre for Social Justice is desperate to show that it is the other way around.

“happy families” (Thane, 2010), the CSJ responded quickly with an aggrieved 24-page rebuttal (Probert and Callan, 2010). Over two decades ago, Charles Murray (1990, p.41) visited London and recommended to policy elites, journalists and think tank officials that the “civilising force of marriage” be the treatment for the “spreading disease” of an “underclass” of single mothers and absent fathers (“essentially barbarians”) (see Wacquant, 2009a, p.7-54). The CSJ has revived this much-derided perspective, which influenced David Cameron’s choice of Father’s Day in 2011 to write a column in *The Sunday Telegraph* that made the following argument:

“I also think we need to make Britain a genuinely hostile place for fathers who go AWOL. It’s high time runaway dads were stigmatised, and the full force of shame was heaped upon them. They should be looked at like drink drivers, people who are beyond the pale.” (Cameron, 2011).

The notions of a broken society full of dysfunctional or troubled families heavily influenced the government’s Welfare Reform Bill, which had a rocky road¹⁴ through Parliament before reaching Royal Assent in March 2012. The hallmark of the Bill was *conditionality*: punitive sanctions applied to claimants¹⁵. Now that the Bill has passed into legislation, unemployed people lose benefits for three months if they refuse the offer of a job for the first time, six months if they refuse an offer twice, and three years if they refuse an offer three times. Given that the CSJ “Economic Dependency” working group “went to the United States to talk to the architects of American welfare reform”, and that Lawrence Mead¹⁶ was invited to Downing Street to advise the Coalition government on work policies immediately after it was formed in May 2010, it is unsurprising that Duncan-Smith commented thus on the launch of the Bill: “play ball or it’s going to be difficult.” (quoted in Porter and Riddell, 2010).

Think tanks have mastered the craft of *decision-based evidence making*, tailored to the needs of policy elites and politicians on the lookout for accessible catchphrases to woo a jaded electorate. As Tyler (2013b) has argued in a remarkable analysis of social abjection in neoliberal Britain, stigmatisation (particularly via discourses of the ‘underclass’) has become a device to *procure consent* for punitive policies directed at those living at the bottom of the class structure. Politicians rarely consult published social science research unless it supports the policies they want to pursue (not a single social scientist was a member of any of the CSJ working groups studying the five “pathways to poverty”). Instead, they depend on neat sound bites from surveys that measure little more than the worldview of the institute that commissions them, where policy ‘researchers’ set out to resolve false problems (even though they have been settled in the way survey questions were formulated). Paul Gilroy is correct that the relationship between information and power has changed since the 1980s: think tanks are now critically important in how state power is mobilized in the extension of conservative, market-rule dogma (Peck and

¹⁴ Peers and Bishops in the House of Lords defeated eight parts of the Welfare Reform Bill, especially its proposal that, regardless of circumstances (disability, family size etc), no household should receive more than £26,000 a year in welfare benefits. The Bill then “ping-ponged” (the official language) for several weeks between the House of Lords and the House of Commons, but in the end MPs overturned the concerns and the votes of the Lords and passed the Bill, principally because they managed to turn specific amendments encouraged by the House of Lords into vague ministerial commitments to undertake some form of ‘review’.

¹⁵ In one of the more depressing outcomes of the riots, an e-petition calling for convicted rioters to have their benefits permanently removed attracted well over 100,000 signatures. At the time, very few made the point that plans to remove benefits are already underway for those living at the bottom of the class structure.

¹⁶ Mead was arguably the most influential scholarly voice behind 1990s welfare-to-work legislation in the United States, consistently arguing that paid employment is an obligation of citizenship.

Tickell, 2007); they have “irrevocably altered the institutional matrix through which policy knowledge percolates” (Wacquant, 2010, p.442). Think tanks actively manufacture ignorance to appease their funders (Monbiot, 2011), buffering politicians and their audiences from viable alternatives and inoculating them against the critique of autonomous scholarship.

In an absorbing recent discussion, Hancock and Mooney (2013) argue that the ‘classed’ narrative of the broken society centres on ‘irresponsibility’ and ‘disorderly behaviour’, and semantic battering rams of ‘worklessness’, ‘criminality’ and ‘underclass’ are key instruments in the Conservative drive to convince people that ‘welfare dependency’ is the underlying cause of civic unrest. Notably, Hancock and Mooney are alert to the relationship between the symbolic and the spatial:

“A specific geography is at work in this broken society narrative.... [P]articular representations of urban places as problematic on a number of different levels are mobilized. While the 2011 disorders were largely confined to inner urban areas with a significant degree of tenure mix, social housing estates (or areas where these dominate) and the populations therein are frequently highlighted and represented as being not only vulnerable, but as particular locales where social pathologies and problems flourish.” (p.48)

The protest at the killing of Mark Duggan drew most of its participants from where he lived, the Broadwater Farm housing estate. It is not by happenstance that many of the ensuing riots occurred in city districts frequently labeled as ‘no-go areas’; the potency of the stigma attached to certain districts such as Handsworth (Birmingham), St. Paul’s (Bristol) and Toxteth (Liverpool) should not be underestimated in any analysis of these events. As Wacquant (2007) has pointed out, the sense of personal indignity territorial stigmatization carries a highly salient dimension of everyday life that negatively affects opportunities in social circles, education, and the labour market. The stigmatized districts of dispossession in the postindustrial city elicit overwhelmingly negative emotions and stern corrective political reactions driven by fright, revulsion, and condemnation, which in turn foster the growth and glorification of the penal wing of the state in order to penalize urban marginality. Long gone are the ambivalent fascination and lurid attraction that political and cultural elites felt for the sordid bas-fonds of the emerging industrial city, which made them upper-class playgrounds for excitement, mysterious sites of social voyeurism, moral transgression, sexual fantasy, and artistic inspiration, as demonstrated by the conjoint invention of ‘slumming’ and ‘undercovery’ journalism centered on the derelict districts of the metropolis (Kalifa, 2012). When persons of power and eminence visit such districts nowadays, it is usually in *martial mode*, to announce measures designated to root out rot, restore order, and punish miscreants (indeed, Easterhouse is *repeatedly* visited by Tory politicians in their efforts to corroborate the need and elicit support for regressive welfare reforms). What is more, many of the youth involved in the 2011 riots reside in pockets of deep poverty surrounded by highly gentrified or elite enclaves, particularly in London (Watt, 2006); their families have been relegated to stigmatised neighbourhoods “in which public and private resources diminish just as the social fall of working-class households and the settlement of immigrant populations intensify competition for access to scarce public goods” (Wacquant, 2008, p.25). It is therefore unsurprising that, for many of the rioters, “it was their sense of being invisible, of being stigmatized, of having no future prospects, which motivated their disorderly behavior” (Tyler, 2013b, p.204).

Transcending the ‘Poverty of the Imagination’ via the Housing Question

Paul Gilroy concluded his speech in Tottenham by arguing that “one of the worst forms of poverty that’s shaped our situation is *poverty of the imagination*” in how social issues are addressed by politicians, particularly when considering what they see to be the future: the supposed lessons to be learned from the United States. One illustration: Cameron’s 11th August emergency statement to Parliament:

“I also believe we should be looking beyond our shores to learn the lessons from others who have faced similar problems. That is why I will be discussing how we can go further in getting to grips with gangs with people like Bill Bratton, former Commissioner of Police in New York and Los Angeles.”

That organized street gangs were not a major factor in the riots (LSE/Guardian, 2012) did not seem to matter: Bill Bratton immediately found himself being touted by journalists as a Dick Tracy figure, a ‘super-cop’ who could come and sort out the problem of English street crime once and for all¹⁷ because of his apparent successes in New York and Los Angeles. Although Bratton arguably helped rebuild police morale in both New York and Los Angeles, the drop in crime in both those cities had nothing to do with his stewardship. In New York, where he was in charge for only two years, he applied ‘zero tolerance’ in a city where crime was already dropping for several other reasons (Bowling, 1999; Harcourt, 2001); in Los Angeles he applied ‘community policing’ (the exact opposite tactic) and crime dipped for other reasons (Goldberger and Rosenfeld, 2009). Proof of Bratton’s ineffectiveness is that he failed miserably in impacting crime in Latin America, where he sold his ‘expertise’ through his private security firm (Mountz and Curran, 2009; Swanson 2013). The irony is that UK policy elites invited Bratton to come to England and consult on ‘zero tolerance’ when Bratton saw the failure of that model and switched to ‘community policing’ - which is patterned after UK policing! In the US, Bratton’s expertise is with cleaning up police department corruption at the bottom and facing lethal street violence. In urban England, the problem is police corruption at the top (as evidenced by the phone-hacking scandal) and low-level, predominantly non-lethal street disorders. These are very different issues, and Bratton as consultant adds nothing progressive to the debate about how to address the issue of street crime sensitively and humanely.

The structural reasons for the English riots are not issues that a US police chief can resolve, yet the climate of ‘fast’ international policy transfer that has become so embedded in the institutional apparatus of neoliberal statecraft (Ward and McCann, 2011) ensures that the causes of advanced urban marginality (state retrenchment, economic deregulation, wage labour fragmentation) are ignored in favour of expanding the penal wing of the state (Wacquant, 2009b). Again the role of think tanks is critically important: Bratton’s status as a ‘super-cop’ is less a media construct and more a think-tank fabrication: the Manhattan Institute in New York City played a pivotal role in (re)packaging and validating the ‘broken windows theory’ in the US (even as it was repeatedly refuted by that country’s respected criminologists) and in the international dissemination (via like-minded think tanks in London) of the strategy of ‘zero tolerance’ policing which was allegedly

¹⁷ Bratton was attracted to the vacant post of Chief Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police until it was realized that, as a non-UK citizen, he could not apply.

derived from it (Mitchell, 2010). If we are to challenge the poverty of the imagination that shields the public from examples of progressive policies in countries other than the US, it is essential to expose the practices and funding of think tanks, to scrutinize their glossy and authoritative pseudo-scientific publications, and dispel the myths propagated by their speechwriters and backroom ‘researchers’.

Paul Gilroy concluded his contribution to the Tottenham community meeting by pointing out that the reaction to the riots is a valuable “primer” in class solidarity, where ruling elites are “telling us something”:

“[T]hey think and act and conduct themselves like a class. They chat to each other, they marry each other, they go to the same places... And if we want to act as a body, if we want to act in concert, we have to learn something from the way they conduct themselves, even as we challenge what they do.”

In terms of class solidarity, there are glimmers of hope in relation to the housing question. There is no space here to provide a detailed history of the now acute housing crisis in Britain, but in sum, it is a depressing story of the privatisation of social housing that began under Margaret Thatcher, together with a dire lack of new social housing provision, the demolition of social housing estates, the erosion of housing assistance, and especially the grotesquely inflated sales and rental prices that have resulted from greed and speculation in the finance industries (Meek, 2014). This has led to a completely unsustainable situation where adequate housing is out of reach for an ever-increasing number of people, even some earning above-average wages. Politicians of all stripes, in the pockets of the banks and the housebuilding industry, now lament a ‘housing shortage’ and attempt to score points off each other regarding who can get local governments release land to build the most new family homes (with ‘affordability’ criteria bearing no relation to actual affordability), yet they - perhaps judiciously - ignore the existence of nearly 1 million empty homes across Britain (not to mention all the empty second homes purchased in scenic rural areas by wealthy people in the south east). The empty homes question, together with the pressing issue of just how many people have to be unable to afford shelter before it becomes a political problem, is becoming a major basis for political mobilisation, not least in London, the city most affected by obscene housing costs. In the autumn of 2014 an important struggle known as FOCUS E15 erupted on the Carpenters Estate in the east London borough of Newham. Two mothers, Sam Middleton and Jasmine Stone (both under the age of 25), occupied an empty flat on the Estate in late September. They were soon joined by several other young mothers who had all experienced the same trauma: being served eviction notices by an emergency hostel (or “sheltered accommodation”, as it is known in Britain) after the funding stream to that council-run hostel was cut. The Carpenters Estate is right next to the 2012 Olympic Park, and four years ago it was cleared of its residents as Newham council tried to sell the land to cash in on the mega-event rentier capitalist bonanza. The last deal fell through, leaving more than 600 council homes empty for four years, and the council wanted to send the families it displaced into hostels to Birmingham or Manchester where rents are considerably cheaper.

The FOCUS E15 protest armed itself with a very simply message: “Social Housing, Not Social Cleansing”. The context for the protest is that social housing all over Britain is being bought out by private developers, councils are trying to divest themselves of what sparse stock they have left, wages do not even cover social rents, and, most galling of all, thousands of homes lie empty in preparation for the billions their destruction will bring in. On October 2nd, Newham Council failed

in its attempt to use the draconian power of ‘interim possession order’ to evict and silence the mothers, who then left home they occupied on their terms. This movement has generated massive attention (helped by celebrity support), especially on social media, and it has inspired similar occupations in other cities. In December 2014 there was a massive victory for residents of another east London housing estate, New Era, when they successfully fought plans by US land investors to evict dozens of families and more than double rents. Westbrook Partners, under huge public pressure because of a campaign against its profiteering motives (again led by mothers on the estate), sold the land upon which New Era sits to the Dolphin Square Charitable Foundation, an affordable housing charity committed to delivering low cost rents to Londoners on low to middle incomes. Housing is – and always has been - class struggle over the rights to social reproduction, over the rights to make a life. It appears to be around the housing question that pathways towards an alternative urban future are opening up.

Conclusion: On Inequality

Imogen Tyler (2013b) was astute in noting that the 2011 riots did not lead to an “alternative aesthetics”; rather, the venom directed towards the rioters via myriad representations ensured that “the rioters became the abjects they had been told they were” (p.204). However, as Tyler continued, what did become apparent to many people, possibly for the first time, was the sheer extent of inequality in England, especially as August 2011 happened in the aftermath of revelations of grotesque pay packets in financial industries, and of parliamentarians who stole from the public coffers with illegal reimbursements. ‘Inequality’ is always a word that makes right wing politicians feel deeply uncomfortable. This is partly because addressing and arresting widening inequality invokes what they see as the fearsome spectre of ‘equality’, which has redistributive and socialist connotations offensive to free market ideology. Although the *Centre for Social Justice* has tried to change the very meaning of social justice, conservatives in the UK are most concerned with avoiding social (family) breakdown, not achieving an abstraction like “justice”, and this has always underpinned their view of the welfare state. Conservative politicians, historically, only take an interest in such matters only in so far as it assists social cohesion to do so, and doesn’t ferment revolt where the wealthy might be required to relinquish their private property rights. Therefore, recent interventions by Danny Dorling presenting simple evidence of inequality are instructive, not least this graphic (see Dorling 2012):



Ruling elites invariably panic when pressed on the inequality problem:

“What I think we shouldn’t do is say, as some seem to on the left: ‘Well, we can’t really do anything about the problem of the riots and criminality that we saw until we have dealt with selfishness and greed elsewhere.’ Some people almost say that until we deal with the problem of inequality in our society, there is nothing you can do to deal with rioting.” (David Cameron, interviewed on Radio 4, 2nd September 2011)

British politicians are highly authoritarian and punitive when it comes to dealing with the destructive consequences of economic deregulation for those at the lower end of the class and status spectrum. The state has responded to the marginality *it has created* (manifested in the existence of unemployment, homelessness, addiction, poor schools, youth rage and so on) by *containing* it and inducing the expanding precariat (Standing, 2011) to accept the unstable and underpaid jobs of the deregulated service economy via workfare reforms. But at the same time, those politicians exhibit a strikingly laissez-faire ethos toward the causal agents of inequality at the top end: powerful corporations and the ‘overclass’ (for example, media tycoons, heads of financial and banking corporations, consultant economists, and politicians). It speaks volumes of the civic unaccountability and personal immorality of ruling elites over the past decade that the phrase ‘copycat criminality’ (which they used to diagnose the spreading of riots in 2011) has not been applied to the financial institutions of the London square mile (and the politicians that count on donations from those institutions), and that the massive crime and commotion that triggered the 2007-8 financial collapse has *still* gone unpunished whilst the state reacts with diligence and virulence against street crime. The fact that all political parties appear to dance to the same (neo)liberal-paternalist anthem not only reveals the evaporation of legitimacy they have inflicted upon themselves; it reveals the prescience of Colin Leys’ (1990) warning that “for an ideology to

be hegemonic, it is not necessary that it be loved. It is merely necessary that it have no serious rival.” (p.127)

The neoliberal revolution that has swept through England since the early 1980s - pioneered by Margaret Thatcher, modified and carried forward so enthusiastically by New Labour, and ending up in the hands of politicians significantly positioned within English aristocracy - has generated considerable turbulence at the bottom of class structure. I have shown in this chapter that, under those neoliberal conditions, it is essential to look well beyond rhetorical ranting and lazy depictions of ‘looting’ and ‘hooliganism’ to understand how and why indignity is visited upon the dispossessed youth of English cities. According to an interpretation of interview data gathered by sociologists embedded in communities affected by rioting, the looting of 2011 was not ‘mindless violence’ but rather “a response to repeated stop-and-search, racist policing, deprivation, poverty, unemployment, cuts to the educational maintenance allowance (EMA), anger, and inequalities between the haves and the have-nots” (James, 2011). Furthermore, those interviews revealed that young people believed that “getting an education was the key to the golden gate, but a year after graduation they were still struggling to find work.” (*ibid.*) Escalating youth unemployment (especially between ages 16-21, and particularly affecting males) has become a major issue over the last decade, and given the demographic involved it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that angry youths torching and looting their own communities is best understood as a response to the compassion fatigue displayed by the state¹⁸. The institutional failures that have hammered youth in recent times have produced a response that should have been expected (given youths’ perceived lack of any alternative): direct confrontation with authorities and the disruption of civil life, a response to “massive structural violence unleashed upon them” (Wacquant, 2008, p.24). Recent European history from the banlieues of France (Dikec, 2007) to the sidewalks of Athens (Sotiris, 2010) shows that if young people are robbed of a sense that they have a dignified future awaiting them, they will take to the streets in collective rage. Put another way, the 2011 riots in urban England taught ruling elites and the often apolitical middle classes a lesson they ignore at their peril: the more that is taken away from young people, the less they have to lose.

¹⁸ Prominent political figures were at pains to show their annoyance at having to cancel their foreign holidays and return to England to deal with the crisis.

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