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# **The English City Riots of 2011, 'Broken Britain' and the Retreat into the Present**

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## **The English City Riots of 2011, 'Broken Britain' and the Retreat into the Present**

### **Abstract**

The responses to the English city riots of 2011 bear a remarkable resemblance to those of historical urban disorders in terms of the way in which they are framed by concerns over "moral decline", "social malaise" and a "lack of self-restraint" among certain sections of the population. In this paper we draw on the work of Norbert Elias and take a long-term perspective in exploring historical precedents and parallels relating to urban disorder and anti-social behaviour. We reject the notion of "Broken Britain" and argue that a more "detached" perspective is necessary in order to appreciate that perceived crises of civilisation are ubiquitous to the urban condition. Through this historical analysis, framed by Elias' theory of involvement and detachment, we present three key arguments. Firstly, that a 'retreat into the present' is evident among both policy discourse and social science in responding to contemporary urban disorder, giving rise to ahistorical accounts and the romanticisation of previous eras; secondly, that particular moral panics have always arisen, specifically focused upon young and working class populations and urban disorder; and, thirdly, that previous techniques of governance to control these populations were often far more similar to contemporary mechanisms than many commentaries suggest. We conclude by advocating a long-term, detached perspective in discerning historical precedents and their direct linkages to the present; and in identifying what is particular about today's concerns and responses relating to urban disorder.

*KEY WORDS:* riots; urban disorder; governance of conduct; civility; incivility; "Broken Britain"; Norbert Elias.

## **Introduction**

*"Has the cycle of prosperity and progress closed?"*

H.G. Wells (1927)

Lord Byron's maiden speech to the House of Lords in February 1812 focused on widespread disorder across Britain and argued that 'arising from circumstances of the most unparalleled distress...nothing but absolute want could have driven a large, and once honest and industrious body of people, into the commission of excesses so hazardous to themselves, their families, and their communities' (quoted in Adams, 2010, p.84).

These tropes of unparalleled anxiety, a decline in honesty and work endeavour and actions damaging to rioters' own communities, are remarkably similar to the discourses surrounding the riots in English cities in August 2011. The Prime Minister, David Cameron (2011) framed the UK coalition government's response to the riots as a 'social fight back' within an understanding of 'a complete absence of self-restraint' and 'a slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations', mirroring the response of Nicolas Sarkozy to the disturbances in French *banlieues* in 2005. The UK governmental response included harsh sentencing for those found guilty of involvement in the riots and extraordinary measures such as attempting to evict households linked to the riots from social housing tenancies. Slater (2011) linked the riots to class territorial stigmatisation and a denial of dignity in cities within the reengineering of the neoliberal state building upon the work of Wacquant (2008) on advanced marginality.

In this paper, we utilise the sociology of Norbert Elias and historians such as Pinker (2011) to explore historical precedents and parallels relating to urban disorder and anti-social behaviour (an approach advocated by Rodger (2006; 2008) and Powell and Flint (2009)). We begin by

summarising contemporary discourses about 'Broken Britain' and the evidence for this and then provide an account of Elias' relevant theories. We continue by presenting three key arguments: firstly that a 'retreat into the present' by both policy discourse and social science (see Cole, 2001; Garrett, 2007) fails to recognise that perceived crises of civilisation are ubiquitous to the urban condition; secondly that particular moral panics have always arisen, specifically focused upon young and working class populations and urban disorder; and, thirdly, that previous techniques of governance to control these populations were often far more similar to contemporary mechanisms than commentaries suggest. We conclude that, although history is often invoked in contemporary discourses about social crisis, both policy makers and social scientists should develop a fuller understanding of the historical sociological consequences of urban change and the governmental and policing techniques used to regulate them.

### **Broken Britain and De-Civilising Processes?**

The paradigm of 'Broken Britain' predates the riots of 2011. The previous New Labour government's 'Respect' agenda, championed by Prime Minister Tony Blair was founded on a belief that 'values necessary to support respect are becoming less widely held - and that this change has led to an increase in disrespectful behaviour' (Respect Task Force, 2006, p.5; see Powell and Flint, 2009). An increasing policy focus on the concept of 'resilience' was utilised to confront uncertainties arising from environmental emergencies, terrorism and social conflict (Cabinet Office, 2009). The Conservative's defining of a 'Broken Britain' has been persistently articulated from 2006, with the Prime Minister arguing that 'huge cultural changes were required within communities lacking the abilities to cope with modern life' (Cameron, 2010; Conservative Party, 2010) and this understanding of de-civilising tendencies in particular communities was also shared by some critics of governmental policy (Rodger, 2008). The Social Justice Policy Group's *Breakdown Britain* report (2006) re-articulated a long-standing concern about an ever growing "underclass" while Alan Duncan MP (2007) described, in a speech to the

Centre for Policy Studies, the need to ‘re-civilise Britain’ to counter a ‘real life Lord of the Flies’ (imagery also used by Melanie Phillips (2011) in immediate response to the riots). For commentators such as Browne (2008) Britons have a widespread sense of decline in morals or values and ‘despite some moral improvements’, family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse and welfare dependency have ‘unequivocally increased’ in the last two decades whilst a decline in social capital is ‘evident’ (*ibid*, pp.1-2). Browne argues that, compared to the Victorian era, there has been a ‘disappearance of deference’ citing declining (Christian) church attendance and the decimation of the value of hard work. Browne’s thesis neglects a wealth of historical evidence about the ambiguities of attitudes to the Church and other authorities, very high levels of alcohol and drug consumption and violence in the Victorian era, the prevalence of graffiti and vandalism and, indeed, early acts of urban ‘terrorism’ such as the spate of bomb attacks on London post offices in 1894 (Butterworth, 2010; Hunt, 2004; Kneale, 2001; O’Neill, 2006; Pearson, 2009). But Browne cites survey studies indicating that this thesis is widely shared by the British population, with a perceived decline in morals, respect for authority and an increase in anti-social behaviour.

However, Griffith *et al.* (2011), in a Young Foundation report, state that there is lack of ‘objective evidence’ for a decline in civility; arguing that Britain remains a well-mannered and courteous society where casual violence and racism have declined, as have perceptions of anti-social behaviour during the 2000s (see Upson, 2006), whilst neighbourliness and volunteering may have increased; although they link ‘high streets descending into violence’ in the riots of 2011 with parts of housing estates becoming ‘no-go areas’ and antagonisms between occupants of different housing tenures. The important role of Think Tanks should be noted here, including the Centre for Social Justice headed by Iain Duncan Smith, and the Young Foundation with strong links to the New Labour governments (see Welshman (2012) for a historical account of the links between research and policy on cycles of deprivation and ‘problem families’). The

dystopian portrayals of deprived neighbourhoods have also been powerfully challenged by Mooney (2009). Griffith *et al.* (2011) locate civility as an important dimension of interactions with strangers which increase in modern societies ('we have to be so polite because we're so different' (p.26)) although they suggest that this generates new flashpoints, rather than the wider and longer-term inculcation of self-restraint and the 'sharpening of the regulation and binding of the emotional economy' hypothesised by Elias (2000, p.106; see also Pinker, 2011) and others (de Swaan, 1995; Wouters, 1986, 2007). Freud's work, which of course influenced Elias greatly, offers something of a synthesis between these two arguments, suggesting that civilisation intensified the repression of an instinctual life and magnified *anxiety* as modern life created a permanent irreconcilability between individual drives and social demands (see Overy, 2010, p.161).

Griffith *et al.* correctly argue for a wider definition of civility beyond etiquette (which is often based on an insider/outsider nexus, as identified by Elias and Scotson (1994)). It is also the case that discourses of civility and civilisation are predominately defined based on the prejudices and expectations of a self-conscious cultural tradition of the educated and dominant classes, which emphasises 'high' culture and polite social behaviour (Elias, 2000; Overy, 2010, p.23). This civic landscape, constructed through language, buildings, rituals and symbols, dominates the representation of the urban (and its problems) to itself (Croll, 1999; Hunt, 2004). Within these representations, concern with the welfare of working class populations has always coincided simultaneously with fears about their morality. These were combined in early industrial legislation including the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act 1802 (see Adams, 2010) and accounts of the industrial city, such as James Philip Kay's (1832) *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester*. This conflict of laissez-faire economics and utilitarian moralities of public welfare, developed in the 1830s, is still being played out in the conditions of neoliberal late modernity (Adams, 2010, p.242) and

the coexistence of concern for welfare and social fear has important implications for our understanding of social processes. Indeed, Elias (1987a) stressed the relationship between knowledge and emotions - most notably the 'safety-danger balance' which shapes the level of social fears within society - and it is to this theoretical body of work that we now turn.

### **Norbert Elias, the retreat into the present and civilisation as an ambivalent process**

It is our contention that the long-term, detached and process-oriented sociology of Norbert Elias provides appropriate theoretical tools for understanding the ubiquity of crises of civilisation. Elias' synthesis can also elaborate the striking similarities in terms of the governance of "problematic" populations within different periods of crisis and the targeted nature of these techniques of control. We therefore wish to focus on two salient aspects of Elias' sociology relevant to the discussion that follows. Firstly, we discuss Elias's sociology of knowledge and its relationship to emotions through a focus on his concept of the 'retreat into the present' (Elias, 1987b). Secondly, we explore the notion of ambivalence in Elias's work with reference to social relations and the counter-currents evident within the overall civilizing process.

One of the striking aspects of responses to the 2011 riots in English cities, and indeed contemporary urban disorder more broadly, is the commonality in responses from political, media and academic sources. These responses are largely related to immediate concerns about moral decline and respect within today's society and often fail to garner insights from the experiences of earlier societies. Using Norbert Elias' theory of involvement and detachment (1987a) we would argue that this represents a 'retreat into the present' (1987b) on the part of social scientists, politicians and social commentators alike. The theory of involvement and detachment is central to Elias' theoretical synthesis and runs through much of his work. For Elias, human knowledge (and therefore the development of the social sciences) is bound up in the development of overall society and therefore unplanned and unforeseen (see Goudsblom,

1977). According to Elias, the concepts of involvement and detachment are not separate, indeed varying degrees of both are *always* present, but can be best understood as the unattainable extreme poles of a spectrum (i.e. total involvement at one end and total detachment at the other), along which the dynamic interplay of the two varies: sometimes more involved and less detached, and vice versa:

*'Only small babies, and among adults perhaps only insane people, become involved in whatever they experience with complete abandon to their feelings here and now; and again only the insane can remain totally unmoved by what goes on around them. Normally adult behaviour lies on a scale somewhere between these two poles'* (Elias, 1987a, p.3).

As far as sociology is concerned it is the continuum that lies between these marginal poles that presents the principal problem: the positioning of people on this continuum and the criteria for different degrees of involvement and detachment. Elias clarifies his use of this terminology and says, when speaking of involvement and detachment, 'one refers in short to changing equilibria between sets of mental activities which in humans' relations with other humans, with non-human objects and with themselves have the function to involve and detach' (Elias, 1987a, p.4).

Elias contrasts the position of the institutionalized and more detached natural scientist with that of the social scientist. Over the long-term humans' control of emotions in their experience of *nature* has increased compared to earlier societies: previously people had very little control over natural forces, were often dependent on them for their survival, and thus plagued by *insecurity*. It is not difficult to understand that they could not help but experience natural events with strong feelings and emotions: 'they were too deeply involved to look at natural phenomena, like distant observers, calmly' (Elias, 1987a, p.8). Elias refers to this situation as the 'double-bind' process: *a higher danger level perpetuating a higher affect in emotional responses*. It is the presence of this 'double-bind process' in humans' experiences of *social* phenomena - in people's relations with each other - which resonates with concerns over urban disorder, anti-social behaviour and the 'fear of crime' linked to an increasingly pervasive societal discourse of urban

and moral decline. And furthermore, this double-bind process is an inherent characteristic of the human and urban condition. That is:

*'While in people's relations with non-human forces the standard of both the control of self and that of external events is relatively high, in relations of people with people the socially required and socially bred standard of both is considerably lower'* (Elias, 1987a, p.11).

As Elias points out problems of knowledge are often discussed as if knowledge existed in a human vacuum, without reference to human beings or their condition and personality (1987a, p.67) - a perspective central to his vehement rejection of philosophy. His criticisms of the western philosophical tradition were fervent and consistent, particularly over the conception of the person (in the singular) as the subject of knowledge emphasised by Descartes, Locke and Kant among others (Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998, p.33). Elias is highly critical of contemporary sociologists<sup>1</sup> who still uncritically draw upon philosophy and the range of static antinomies it perpetuates (e.g. truth/falsity; rational/irrational) (Kilminster, 1998); sociologists who have confined themselves to the issues of the present and in the process have lost the ground gained by the battles and advances of the earlier sociological pioneers such as Marx or Weber (Kilminster, 1987, p.216), both of whom looked to the past when seeking the answers to the problems of their own societies:

*'The preoccupation of the sociologists with the social problems and conflicts of the present represents a dominance of involved thinking - they are highly emotionally absorbed in those problems and issues. Their very involvement indeed galvanizes them in the pursuit of short-term, empirical knowledge in order to illuminate the problems about which they feel so strongly'* (Kilminster, 1987, p.216).

Thus the need for a long-term, detached perspective in responding to incidences of urban disorder is crucial to our understanding: an emotionally-driven retreat into the present can serve to blind us to historical precedents and long-term social processes and block the path to an understanding of what is unique about the present situation. This retreat can also be particularly damaging where it results in short-term social misdiagnoses of contemporary

problems (Kilminster, 2008) and the legitimization of civilising offensives (Powell and Flint, 2009; Powell, 2010; Rodger, 2008); both of which have a tendency to be targeted at particular stigmatised (outsider) groups. To summarize, a higher danger level in our experience of relations with other people perpetuates a higher level of emotional response. In terms of the current discourse, as involvement gains the upper hand, this is manifested in insecurity and a social fear of certain populations and urban spaces, and perpetuated by pervasive and unproblematised constructions of the 'causes of decline' (note how decline is a given). The "current crisis" is then accentuated by unfavourable comparisons with previous societies, which are invariably based on a romanticised and nostalgic perspective of bygone eras (e.g. the relative "tranquility" and "civility" of the Victorian era).

For our purposes here, it is useful to complement this notion of a retreat into the present, precipitated by involved thinking, with a brief discussion of the inherent ambivalence of social relations that characterise civilizing processes. Central to Elias's sociology is the assertion that human configurations are in a constant state of flux: 'civilized and uncivilized [or "decivilized"] do not constitute an antithesis of the kind that exists between "good" and "bad", but represent stages in a development which, moreover, is still continuing' (Elias, 2000, p.52). Again, the long-term nature of social development is crucial to our understanding: 'In each phase there are numerous fluctuations, frequent advances or recessions of the internal and external constraints. An observation of such fluctuations, particularly those close to us in time, can easily obscure the general trend' (Elias, 2000, p.157; see also Pinker, 2011). Elias gives the example of the perceived relaxation of morals between the post-WWI and pre-WWII period (see below for more on this period) - a time of heightened sensitivity to the notion of an erosion of morals within society:

*'And seen at close quarters...it seems to lead to a relaxation of the constraints imposed on individuals by social life. But on closer examination it is not difficult to perceive that this is merely a very slight recession, one of the fluctuations that constantly arise from the complexity of the historical movement within each phase of the total process'* (Elias, 2000, p.157).

This notion of divergent phases within the overall, long-term civilizing process has been developed further by Cas Wouters in his theory of informalization, defined as 'the trend towards diminishing formality and rigidity in the regimes of manners and emotions and towards increasing behavioural and emotional alternatives' (Wouters, 2007, p.8) (see Powell and Flint, 2009; Powell, 2010). These shifts and counter-trends inherent in civilizing processes can certainly serve to heighten perceptions of a loss of self-restraint and moral decline but, yet again, it is the involved thinking which results in a misreading of such processes (Kilminster, 2008) as 'people can frequently see nothing in these changes other than degeneration into disorder. It appears merely as an expression of a loosening of the code of behaviour and feeling, without which a society must fall into destruction' (Elias quoted in Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998, p.245).

In what follows we draw upon these theoretical standpoints and take a long-term perspective in suggesting the recurrence of crises of civilisation as a characteristic of the urban condition and point to common historical responses to these perceived crises.

### **A Perpetual Crisis of the Present**

According to Judt (2010, p.8) 'we have entered an age of insecurity - economic insecurity, physical insecurity, political insecurity', characterised by deep seated anxieties about change and narratives of uncertainty and decline (see also Hall, 2007; Sibley, 2003) and a loss of ontological security as the constancy of social and material environments is perpetually undermined (Giddens, 1990). The roots of our present condition or 'malaise' (Overy, 2010) are often identified from the 1970s, described as 'an age of anxiety' (Mackay, 1993) or 'angst society' (Scott, 2000). Three features dominate this paradigm of a contemporary crisis. Firstly, that social solidarities have declined and consequently a 'habitus of self-restraint has unravelled'

(Pratt, 2005) as materialism and selfishness dominate contemporary life and the social stigmatisation of lower social groups intensifies (Judt, 2010; Jones, 2011; Slater, 2011). Secondly, that in this age of 'liquid life' (Bauman, 2005) the fragility of routines and habits creates a 'vertigo' of late modernity' (Young, 2007). Thirdly, that we become ever more aware of risks (Beck, 1992) and the insecurities and precariousness of our present position (Colic-Peisker and Johnson, 2010).

We set out three arguments in response. Firstly, that conceptualisations of the fraying of old ideas of discipline or order in cities need to be located within 'ceaseless narratives of decline' (Pearson, 2009) and that, far from contemporary society being subject to a uniquely perceived moment of crisis, such moments are inherent and ubiquitous to the human and urban condition. As Overy (2010) describes, these are represented as threats to 'our way of life' that persist even in periods of relative stability and/or prosperity. These crises extend beyond specific moral panics (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 1994; Cohen, 1972) although these are important and we provide examples. But these panics are symptomatic of a wider context in which a crisis of civilisation, and discursive and governmental responses, are a constant feature of urban and national histories. Secondly, we argue that specific concerns about urban disorder and young people have previous parallels and precedents that have been under-represented in contemporary social science. Thirdly, we suggest that, linked to this, there is considerable continuity in practices of governance in the fields of anti-social behaviour, and how these are responded to by the subjects of these practices, which require further attention.

We acknowledge that the proponents of a contemporary age of insecurity are aware of historical precedents and their ambiguities and the persistence of perceptions of moral decline in each generation (Browne, 2008; Judt, 2010; Slater, 2011). We also accept that, as Elias (2000) and Pinker (2011) have demonstrated, forms of social restraint and control do change; and that

these changes reflect corresponding alterations in standards of conduct driven by dynamic social relations and changing power balances that characterise human figurations (Elias, 2000; Wouters, 1986, 2007). For example Charles Booth (1967) noted how the habit of smoking in the street became socially acceptable in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century when previously it had been inadmissible. Similarly, Sennett (1993) discusses 'revolts against the past' by women in urban cities around 1890 in relation to the process of the 'de-Victorianizing' of clothes. We also agree with previous studies that have identified specific civilising offensives, how they reflect the standards of particular phases of development (Elias, 2000) and how these can also involve enhanced or relaxed social or governmental control, for example prohibition in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ben-Yahuda and Goode, 1994) or the increasing persecution of homosexuals in Georgian London in the 1720s (Cruickshank, 2010).

But we suggest the need for a more explicit articulation of history in these accounts. This matters because it is vital to our sociological understanding and to our assessment of current regimes of governance. Historical traditions have contributed to sociology and analysis of regimes of governance, including the oral and cultural history works of Wilmott and Young (1957) and Hoggart (1957), the social economic histories of Bottomore (1964) on elites, and class structure and genealogies of governance (Foucault, 1977). This is not simply an abstract discussion of previous, but disconnected, cycles of history. Rather, their *direct linkages to the present must be better understood*. For example, the tenacity of historic neighbourhoods and their spatial boundaries, identities and social stigmas frame contemporary action, such that 'ghosts run the city' (Berman, 1988; Body-Gendrot, 2000; Fraser, 1996; Robertson *et al.*, 2008) and place is perpetually possessed by what Bowden (2011, p.15) terms 'time-deepened psychogeographies.' This also requires us to reinvestigate our understanding of urban form and its dynamics. For example, Cruickshank (2010) shows how much of the Georgian architecture now much vaunted in our towns and cities was a result of unstable property speculation in

response to short-term profit motives equivalent to the contemporary processes much critiqued as being responsible for the failures of urban planning and housing crises. Cruickshank also argues that this architecture was significantly financed by the economics of the Georgian sex industry. In presenting historical cases, we wish to move beyond a simple argument that 'the good old days' never existed or that we have been here before. Rather, we wish to promote an Eliasian perspective to support the thesis of Pinker (2011) that, in historical terms, in many western cities there is less violence, increasing levels of restraint and that life has become less dangerous.

Our first argument is that periods of perceived crisis in the urban condition are ubiquitous in western societies. For example, the period between 1871 and 1917 has been characterised as an age of decadence and degeneration and a moment of crisis in western cities (Butterworth, 2010). Overy (2010) describes the decades of the 1920s and 1930s in Britain as a 'morbid' age and a 'crisis of civilisation', in which anxiety, along with 'the glittering promise of mass consumption and a narcotic hedonism' was a defining feature of culture (*ibid*, p.2). Beatrice Webb's description of a 1920s 'moral miasma' characterised by 'an atmosphere of morbid alcoholism and sexuality, furtive larceny and unashamed mendacity' (quoted in Overy, 2010, p.70) resonates powerfully with commentaries on urban Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, including the perceived rise of a 'barbarous underclass' (*ibid*) and the focus on single mothers in post-riots rhetoric (Phillips, 2011), within a long tradition of problematising the sexual conduct of working class women (Cruikshank, 2010; Stokoe, 2003). Alarmist reports on crime, prostitution and delinquency in the 1920s and 1930s were entwined with the development of eugenics and the first usage of the term 'social problem group'. It is also notable that this timeframe (often labelled the 'Roaring Twenties') corresponds to the 'wave of informalization', identified by Wouters (2007), and concerns over standards of behaviour and promiscuity as Brighton emerged as a 'dirty weekend' destination (Shields, 1990) for instance.

Of course, the presence of previous periods of crisis does not necessarily invalidate arguments that we are living through a contemporary period characterised by crisis or a retreat from progress or security in the immediately preceding epoch. For many contemporary commentators, the period from the second world war to the mid-1970s in western societies may retrospectively be understood as a 'bubble' of prosperous security and relative comfort (Judt, 2010, p.52) in which, for example, unemployed populations would not have aspersions cast upon them and where working class communities were less subject to social opprobrium (Judt, 2010; Jones, 2011). Or, as Wouters (1986) puts it, a period when people were gradually more inclined to identify with the underdog in recognition of the fact that unequal relations were "unharmonious". However, we would counter this by suggesting that, despite evident progressive social programmes and increasing material equality in relative terms, a more detailed understanding of this period would reveal the ambiguities and distinctions towards and within working class populations and the project of the welfare state (Elias, 1994; Hoggart, 1957; Kynaston, 2008, 2010; Young and Wilmott, 1957).

In addition, juvenile delinquency and a loss of work ethic remained a 'pressing concern' in the post-war years as did the perceived need to 'reclaim delinquents for the nation' (Kynaston, 2008, p.367). For example, in 1955 a prominent report entitled *Citizens of Tomorrow* claimed that recruits to the armed forces 'had a poor physique, poor education and lacked religious knowledge, self-confidence, initiative and a sense of responsibility' (Kynaston, 2010, p.548), mirroring the discourses about young people in contemporary Britain, preceding and following the riots in 2011. So, just as crises of urban civilisations have their historical parallels, the juxtaposition of neo-liberalism with its preceding decades corresponds with the First World War being represented as a fracture from pre-war expectations of relentless advance (Overy, 2010), or conditions in Victorian cities including morals, sexual conduct and indulgence in

'stimulants' during the Industrial Revolution destroying Georgian motifs of urban patriotism and progress (Hall, 1998; Hunt, 2004).

### *Liquid Modernity and its Vertigo*

Before turning to urban disorder, it is worth making a more general point about the extent to which the sociology of contemporary urban conditions may be regarded as specific to our own epoch. We have already identified how influential works by Bauman (2005), Young (2007), Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) have characterised contemporary life as one of bewildering economic and social change. A life in which risk becomes ever more prominent and anchors of tradition, habit and community become unsettled with the speed of rapidly evolving communications, technologies, employment practices, population flows and the new skills required to navigate these conditions. Indeed, Griffith *et al.* (2011, p.33) explicitly link these trends to civilising processes, arguing that 'old-fashioned civility could also be a means of coping with the constant flux of modernity'. However, we would argue that such 'ontological insecurity' (Giddens, 1990) is equivalent to previous periods in its emotional and social effects upon certain populations. For example, accounts of cities in England during the Industrial Revolution abound with descriptions of the importance of time to London's 'rushing citizens' (Adams, 2011, p.233); 'the step of haste', 'how hurried men are', 'how they are terrifically chased into double-quick speed' and how the world moves at a 'smarter pace' than before as the new metropolis 'accelerated the rhythm of exchange and ceaselessly stirred up men's lives' (see Hall, 1998; Hunt, 2004). Robert Park identified similar phenomena in Chicago in the 1920s: 'Everything is loose and free, but everything is problematic' (Introduction to Zorbaugh, 1929, p. xviii) and, in the same period in Britain there was an 'increase in nervous instability due to the rush of modern life...and general uncertainty as to the future' (Overy, 2010, p.134). Traditional attachments were viewed as vanishing in these new cities as 'not even gossip' sustained social interactions and belonging (Toynbee, 1884; Zorbaugh, 1929). Similarly, Beck's important work

on risk in late modernity (1992) requires cognisance of previous periods when our relationship with the future has been reframed. For example, as Dillon (2006, p.380) argues, during the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century when through gambling, stock-dealing and insurance the future became calculable, challenging the religiously-dominated pre-determinism of previous ages. So, although Judt (2010, p.1) may still be correct to suggest that 'something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today' and 'that there was a time when we ordered our lives differently' (*ibid*, p.39) we do need a more precise understanding about what is *unique* or *different* about the sociological effects of contemporary changes on urban populations.

### **Urban Disorders, Gangs and Young People**

The historical precedents for the riots in English cities and towns in August 2011 are evident. In 1898, during a particularly hot British summer, the media and political classes were exercised by concerns about August bank holidays and celebrations leading to drunkenness, fighting, street robberies and assaults (Savage, 2007, p.904). Similarly, Charles Booth documented concerns about the 'abandonment of restraint', including sexual conduct, on bank holidays (Booth, 1967, p.308). These particular temporal and spatial events were located in a longer history of gangs, including female gangs, for example in New York in the 1850s and a narrative of increasing juvenile delinquency featuring gangs with clearly demarcated neighbourhood territories and large scale urban disorder, for example a battle of 'Scuttlers' in Manchester in 1890 involving at least 500 participants (Savage, 2007). As Davies notes, 'scuttling gangs were neighbourhood-based youth gangs which were formed in working class districts across the Manchester conurbation' (Davies, 1998, p.2) in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, there is a clear resonance with twenty-first century anti-social behaviour discourses in Davies' account. For example, in a court hearing regarding a street robbery by a scuttling gang one Inspector went as far as to say that the four defendants were from a 'gang of scuttlers, who were the terror of the neighbourhood they infested' (Davies, 1999, p.82) - a statement containing clear

echoes of the post-riots media discourse on 'feral families' and 'wild beasts' (Hastings, 2011; White, 2011). Not only in terms of the dehumanization of the 'problem' (i.e. 'infestations' versus 'feral youth') but it would also appear that similar discursive constructions are evident between the two eras, with the respectable clearly distinguished from the anti-social or the morally unsound minority. As ever, at the time these were conceptualised as 'new developments' with a new class of 'city boy' or 'slum denizen'. Savage (2007) and Pearson (2009) identify how problematic youth groups such as the 'apaches' of Paris (or later Sheffield in the 1920s, see Bean, 1981) or 'hooligans' of British cities (see Daily Telegraph, 2011) were largely a media creation amplifying the behaviour of a minority into a generalised climate of fear (see Cohen, 1972).

*'The "Hooligan" was to embark on a spectacular official career in the early years of the twentieth century. He would appear, if not in person then at least in name, before numerous committees of inquiry into the troubled state of the nation. He loomed large in the inspirations for Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts...He would be feared by some as the herald of a dark hour in the nations affairs'* (Pearson, 2009, p.53)

But what is striking is how the underpinning causes of youth delinquency, epitomised in street disorder, were historically described in terms and concepts that mirror almost identically the current responses to the 2011 riots. Savage (2007) describes how, a century before 'hoodies', connections were made between dress style and delinquency (a process continued through the mods and rockers of the 1960s and the football casuals of the 1980s). Supposed 'unfulfilled desires for consumption' epitomised youth delinquency in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century just as acquisitive looting, materialism, brands and marketing have dominated post-riot debates in 2011 (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2012; Slater, 2011; see also Bauman, 1998). Additionally, the rejection of salaried work and conflict within families was applied to earlier youth disturbances (Savage, 2007) just as the lack of a work ethic and family breakdown are defining features of the current 'Broken Britain' paradigm. Beyond actual urban disorder, young people 'loaf[ing] around the streets' in large and "embarrassing" crowds were problematic for the police and commentators of the 1890s and 1930s alike (Booth, 1967; Savage, 2007). Increases in juvenile delinquency figures in both England and Germany during the First World

War were further linked to a lack of the presence of fathers or other male authority figures, pre-empting the identification of a lack of responsible fatherhood as a key catalyst for the 2011 riots (Cameron, 2011; Centre for Social Justice, 2011; Savage, 2007, p.161).

### **Techniques of Governance**

There are also powerful similarities in the techniques of governance and mechanisms of policing urban disorder that need to be understood before identifying 'new' methods of regulation in the neoliberal period. Some of the trends regularly cited as specific features of contemporary society existed previously. For example, the legitimacy and authority of police officers and urban park attendants in the period from 1880 to 1930 was constantly challenged and undermined, with offenders regularly ignoring, ridiculing and, in some cases, assaulting these figures of government (Bean, 1981; Croll, 1999; Marne, 2001). In addition, neighbours were often afraid to give evidence because of fear of reprisals (Pearson, 2009).

Governmental and policing responses often involved methods that mirror those of today, including exceptional powers in response to specific events. Following a series of disorders at northern racecourse meetings in the summer of 1925 the Home Secretary considered a short Act of Parliament empowering magistrates to inflict heavier punishments for gang hooliganism based solely on police evidence (Bean, 1981), and new forms of policing were utilised from the Victorian era onwards to address violence and incivility related to football matches (Curry, 2007; Davies, 2006; Pearson, 2009). The contemporary use of Anti-social Behaviour Orders and Dispersal Orders which limit the spatial movement and social association of individuals have their precedent in the tactics of the Flying Squad in mid-1920s Sheffield instigating a rule that gang members were not allowed to congregate or travel in groups of more than three (Bean, 1981). As with the responses to the 2011 riots, these were conceived as exceptional and temporary measures to address a specific and magnified moment of urban disorder.

The current debate about alcohol pricing and the regulation of licensed premises and the night-time economy, and techniques such as *Pub Watch* which link establishments and prohibit individuals from entering these establishments (Hadfield, 2006) replicate police pressure on landlords not to serve gang members in 1920s Sheffield (Bean, 1981); or the use of a black list in late Victorian Merthyr Tydfil, which included the names and photographs of offenders, who could be excluded for up to three years, being circulated to all publicans (Croll, 1999, p.264). This technique was similar to the use of the expanding local press to publicise details about individual transgressors in order to utilise the mechanism of *shame* to regulate urban space (Croll, 1999; Elias, 2000). These have their contemporary corollaries in the publicising of individuals subject to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders or the listing of fare avoiders by metro, rail and bus companies (Powell and Flint, 2009), or the use of the 'Not Wanted List' which presents the names and previous addresses of individuals banned from accessing the premises and grounds of New York City Housing Authority (see <http://home2.nyc.gov/html/nycha/downloads/pdf/j12febe.pdf>). The limitations of shaming mechanisms were identified by Croll (1999, p.266) as some black listed individuals 'were immune to the civilising power of the public gaze' and 'revelled in the notoriety', just as Anti-social Behaviour Orders are often equated with being a 'badge of honour' for those subject to them (although empirical research (McIntosh, 2008) challenges this interpretation). As Croll (1999) and Elias (2000) suggest, these techniques of governance promote 'self-control' as a key mechanism for 'civilising' the urban landscape. Finally, contemporary debates about the responsibility of citizens to 'stand up' to anti-social behaviour (Powell and Flint, 2009), the emergence of the riots clean-up campaign organised through Twitter (see Castella, 2011) and the increasingly complex assemblage of public and private security regimes in our cities have their precedents. These include press demands for the formation of a national guard to protect property in the period leading to Second Reform Bill of 1832 (Adams, 2010, p.229); the

'vigilance committees' of late Victorian Britain (Croll, 1999); and organisations such as the Society for Reformation of Manners (who actively used agent provocateurs to prosecute homosexuals in Georgian London, Cruickshank, 2010) and the National Council of Public Morals and Public Morality Council in Britain in the 1930s.

## **Conclusions**

In critiquing contemporary understandings of social conditions, it is surely correct to identify with Cooke Taylor's observation in 1842 (quoted in Hunt, 2004, p.209) that populations develop new habits or thoughts and actions formed by the circumstances of their conditions. From an Eliasian perspective we would also emphasize the role of changing social interdependencies in disseminating conduct, and the nature of power balances in shaping these new habits and actions. What we have tried to demonstrate and argue for in this paper is the need for a more *precise* identification of the sociological impacts of contemporary change and the *specific novel* elements of governance which are more informed by historical knowledge. Our brief and by no means exhaustive comparison of incivilities and urban disorder has pointed to a number of historical continuities which have been neglected by a narrow focus on contemporary social concerns: the persistent focus on young people and working class populations within historical moral panics; and the similarity in the techniques of governance in response to these populations. We have also suggested that the lack of acknowledgement of historical precedents in terms of "crises of civilisation" has its roots in a predominance of "involved" thinking which has precipitated a 'retreat into the present' and a neglect of long-term social processes.

However, once we shift beyond static conceptions and take an approach which emphasises the ambivalence of civilising processes we cannot only move towards a better understanding of the roots and manifestations of today's urban antagonisms, but also reveal the areas which might

yield fruitful inquiry in understanding what is *unique* about today's concerns. That is, an appreciation of historical continuities gives rise to an understanding of difference. Following Elias' cue, comparison of incivilities in different eras might also be complemented by a detailed contrasting of the social relations of those periods, far more extensively than has been possible here, in order to illuminate the effects of changing power relations and social processes which impact upon behavioural expectations. For example the contemporary focus on urban youth would benefit from an understanding of changes which have impacted upon young people's socialisation, varying standards of conduct and power relations relative to earlier eras. From an Eliasian perspective this, in turn, points to important social developments in the UK (and in other western European countries) which are absent from prominent accounts of perceived decivilising processes and moral and urban decline. While we have discussed striking similarities between different eras, comparison also highlights distinctions which we would suggest require detailed investigation if we are to move towards an understanding of what is particular about today's manners and behaviour. For a start, such areas for inquiry might include: the changing distance between childhood and adulthood and the different nature of the transition to work; tension balances in the proclamation of the rights of children from the mid-twentieth century onwards; and the varying impact of individualisation processes and changes in behavioural expectations.

One of the strengths of Elias' theory is the emphasis placed on the relationship between emotions, social processes and knowledge. As we have argued, this conception is particularly helpful in critiquing what is often perceived as a contemporary social malaise. Perspectives on social and moral decline are often charged with emotionally-driven views and ideas about the groups and communities at the source of this decline, and this vilification can be accentuated by a rise in the 'fear of crime' fuelled by media discourse, moral panic and romanticised views of bygone eras (Croll, 1999; Davies, 1999; Curry, 2007). These interrelated trends impact on

perceptions of a relative moral decline and diminution in respect in which these trends are not seen as universal, nor in historical perspective, but are aligned with particular 'outsider' groups to which those 'in fear' (the established) disidentify from. This suggests the need for a renewed emphasis on historical group relations in any understanding of urban antagonisms. In Eliasian terms, the heightened danger level - whether perceived or real - has a significant bearing on our knowledge and views on urban disorder, incivility and civilisation. Elias (1987a) would argue that for those involved in the production of this knowledge there is an imperative need for a detached perspective in order to recognise historical precedents, learn from them, and to continue the shift towards a higher level of reality-congruent knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Elias did not engage in debates with his peers or contemporary sociologists in the conventional sense. As Kilminster notes: 'He only obliquely engages with the theories of other writers or schools...This abstention from getting involved in contemporary debates is quite deliberate. It is in order not to be diverted from the primary task at hand - empirical research - by elaborate in-house sociological discussions' (1987, p.215).