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RECENT RIOTS IN THE UK AND FRANCE: CAUSES AND COMMONALITIES

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Abstract

A number of academic studies have sought to comparatively analyse the French riots of 2005 with those that occurred in England in 2011, yet these have been limited in their scope and depth. In this article, we set out a more comprehensive analysis of the causes and underlying meaning of these episodes of collective disorder through a systematic application of the Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder to each case. The argument identifies and considers points of overlap and tension between the various causal factors underpinning the respective riots, engaging with both the background causes (long- and short-term) and the 'triggering' event that prompted a latent potential for violence to become manifest as rioting. In addition to providing an analytical framework for the comparative study of these important episodes of rioting, the article constitutes a response to recent criticisms regarding the explanatory scope of the flashpoints model and demonstrates the continued relevance of the model as a robust conceptual framework within which the anatomy of collective disorder can be dissected and understood.

Keywords

English Riots 2011; French Riots 2005; flashpoints model of public disorder; policing

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Focus and Objectives

Several earlier publications by the second author and his colleagues have highlighted explanatory similarities and differences in the underlying causes, motives and 'political meanings' of the French riots of 2005 and their counterparts occurring in the UK in 1981, 1991 and 2001 (Waddington, 2007, 2010a; Waddington et al., 2009; Waddington and King, 2009, 2012). The current paper seeks to complement and enhance the insights deriving from these studies by conducting a similar analytical comparison of the French riots and those taking place in England in August 2011, both of which originated from the deaths of ethnic minority youths engaged in encounters with police officers in districts of Paris and London, respectively, but quickly extended into other major towns and cities nationwide.

The now-familiar trigger that ignited the three weeks of rioting in France from late October through November 2005 was one of those seemingly 'banal confrontations' (Brown, 2007) that characterise interactions between police and local youths in the Parisian suburbs. On 27 October, police responding to information regarding a potential break-in at a local construction site tried to intercept a group of nine local youths. Six of them were apprehended almost immediately, but three others (17-year-old Zyed Benna, 15-year-old Bouna Traoré, and 17-year-old Muhittin Altun), who were all of immigrant origins, tried to escape by hiding on the site of a power substation. Their efforts to evade police had disastrous consequences: Zyed and Bouna were fatally electrocuted while Muhittin sustained serious injuries (Moran, 2012).

News of this incident swiftly circulated in the neighbourhood, provoking a highly destructive two-hour 'rampage' in which some 100 local youths wreaked havoc by inflicting damage on public buildings and setting fires to two dozen cars (Brown, *op. cit.*). After two further nights of intermittent local rioting, similar disorders (an estimated 200 in all) rapidly started to spread beyond Paris into the suburban areas of other major French cities, such as Lyon, Toulouse, Nancy and Pau. During the ensuing 20-day period of violence, the police looked on virtually helplessly as an estimated 10,000 cars were ritualistically burned, with 1400 being set alight on the evening of 8 November alone (*ibid.*). The total cost of the resulting urban destruction was subsequently put at €200 million. Of the 5,200 people arrested for allegedly taking part in the riots, 600 were eventually imprisoned (Mucchielli, 2009).

The English riots of 2011 were 'sparked' in a similar fashion to the French disorders of 2005. Here, too, a police-related killing - in which Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old man of African-Caribbean origins, was shot dead while being pursued by officers in the Tottenham area of north London in the early evening of 4 August - was pivotal to the wider conflict. The officers involved in this incident formed part of the Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS's) 'Operation Trident', a specialist unit responsible for tackling 'gun crimes' in London's black communities. When the incident took place, members of this unit had been following Mr Duggan as he made his way back to his home at the local Broadwater Farm estate, evidently with the intention of arresting him. Initial press reports of the incident claimed that Duggan was a well-known local 'gangster' and that his killing had occurred in the context of a fiercely contested shoot-out (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011) - a view dismissed by large sections of the Broadwater Farm community, who strongly suspected that the police were covering up a serious instance of wrongdoing (Reicher and Stott, 2011).

Two days after the Duggan shooting, a crowd of 200 protesters, consisting mainly of women and children, marched through the Broadwater Farm estate and gathered outside the Tottenham Court Road police station to demand further details of the circumstances of his death. The two-hour protest remained largely peaceful, but shortly after most of those present had dispersed,

rioting broke out between young people and police. The riots were initially limited to the local area, but they soon spread over the course of the next four days – initially to a dozen more locations in the capital, and thereafter, to over sixty other towns and cities nationwide, including parts of Birmingham and Manchester (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011). It was later reported that five civilians were killed as a result of the rioting, and that, of the several hundred injured, 318 were police officers. Official estimates put the number of people involved in the rioting at somewhere between 13,000 and 15,000. Of these, some 4,000 people were arrested for their alleged part in the disorder (ibid.).

Previous attempts to comparatively analyse the French and most recent UK riots have been undertaken by Body-Gendrot (2013) and Sutterlüty (2014). The present study aims to set out a more comprehensive analysis of the underlying meanings and motives of these riots via a systematic application in each case of the Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder (e.g. Waddington, 1992, 2007, 2010b; Waddington et al., 1989). In addition to providing an analytical framework for the comparative study of these important episodes of rioting, these extensive applications of the flashpoints model constitute a response to criticism (notably, by Otten et al., 2001) that it does not provide sufficient insight into riot processes and dynamics occurring beyond the initial outbreak of disorder (i.e. its ‘flashpoint’ or triggering incident).

Framework of Analysis: The Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder

In a highly relevant essay which focuses on the possible political motives of the English disorders, Angel (2012, p. 25) remarks that the distinction ‘between the dramatic “trigger” event and the underlying social, economic or political conditions that make the subsequent chain of events more likely is an important one in understanding the UK riots of 2011’. This observation is echoed in the following attempt to use the Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder as the basis of a fully rounded appreciation of the underlying political motives and meanings, not only of the English riots, but also of the preceding French disturbances of 2005.

The flashpoints model attaches great significance to those highly emotive triggering incidents (‘flashpoints’) that invariably serve as the catalysts for wider disorder. The model presupposes that, in order to appreciate the full symbolic significance of such incidents, and the panoply of emotions and behaviours they induce, it is necessary to examine the full range of relevant variables existing at seven key levels of analysis: *structural, cultural, institutional/organisational, political/ideological, contextual, situational* and *interactional* (e.g. Waddington, 1992, 2010a; Waddington et al., 1989).

The *structural* level is concerned with those conditions affecting particular sections of society (e.g. material inequalities, political powerlessness and inferior ‘life chances’) which induce collective sensations of grievance and disaffection. Strongly related to such patterns are those aspects of group *culture* (i.e. systems of value and belief, ways of life and repertoires of action) that enable the people concerned – such as ethnic minority youths – to cope with and make sense of whatever social worlds they inhabit. This emphasis on group culture also extends to relevant features of the police occupational culture, such as the everyday stereotypes and recipes of action which enable them to carry out and justify their role. This ties in, in turn, with possible influences on police behaviour existing at the *institutional/organisational* level, such as national (and/or local) traditions of policing, bureaucratic structures, systems of accountability, training regimes or standard operating procedures, which may have a bearing on public order strategy or tactics.

The *political/ideological* level focuses on the ways in which key political ideological institutions (e.g. the government, political parties, lobby groups, the police and mass media) respond to the

lifestyles and political demands of culturally or politically dissenting groups and their chosen ways of representing their claims, objectives and/or identities. These processes are fundamental to explaining the tolerance or severity with which the police may choose to deal with the group in question, as well as the latter's readiness to engage in violence and disruption as ways of getting their claims and grievances across.

The *contextual* level of analysis incorporates a wide range of communication processes, such as rumours of police atrocities, media sensitisation to the prospect of violent confrontation, a negative history of police-community conflict, and a recent build-up (and discussion) of aggressive encounters between police and local residents, which are likely to have an emotionally arousing effect. This is not to be confused with the *situational* level, which is more concerned with the immediate physical or spatial setting in which actual or potential violence may occur. This level is clearly underpinned by an important subjective dimension – exemplified by the recognition that particular locations may be imbued with special symbolic or cultural significance; an example here would be a section of 'turf' to be taken by the police or defended by local youths. Moreover, these symbolically significant locations may contain or revolve around specific 'targets of derision' such as a notorious local police station that can both increase the potential for disorder and serve as focal points for violence once the riot has begun.

As its name suggests, the *interactional* level relates to the nature and consequences of interpersonal and intergroup interaction between the police and relevant civilians. The quality of such interaction will inevitably be influenced by the predisposing effect of variables located at the preceding levels of analysis. Such variables will also have a great bearing on the meaning attached to any actual or potentially triggering incidents ('flashpoints') and the ensuing social reaction. The significance of such flashpoints lies in their capacity to symbolise an unwillingness by the police and/or civilians to accommodate their opponents' rights or objectives, or represent a seemingly deliberate transgression of a tacitly agreed code of permissible behaviour (or 'pattern of accommodation'). This 'overstepping of the mark' is liable to prove even more precipitous in the presence of 'intensifiers' – i.e. characteristics of the individuals involved (e.g. a high-ranking police officer or 'vulnerable' person, such as a woman, elderly person or child), or of the activity itself (e.g. an especially rough or degrading arrest).

The flashpoints model has been subjected to a penetrating and useful critique by Otten et al. (2001). The criticism by these authors that the model adds little to our understanding of the post-flashpoint development of any particular riot (what they refer to as the 'onset' phase) is not *entirely* justified. In keeping with the work of Reicher and his colleagues (e.g. Drury and Reicher, 2000), the model maintains that police interventions of this kind may unwittingly succeed only in unifying the crowd against them and drawing in the previously non-partisan (i.e. inducing a 'bystander effect'). The potential may still exist at this point for the confrontation to be reversed via the implementation of 'pacifiers' – acts of reparation, such as the releasing of a prisoner or intervention of a credible intermediary. Nevertheless:

Should confrontation continue unabated, the targeting of people or property will vary both in form and severity, but will ultimately remain 'meaningful' in respect of factors residing at the previous levels of analysis. The characteristic sentiments and emotions of the rioters (e.g. power, elation, liberation and revenge) will likewise be interpretable with regard to the specific grievances held by a dissenting group, their political marginality and their recent exposure to oppressive forms of policing. (Waddington, 2010b, p. 346)

Otten et al. undoubtedly have a strong case, however, in asserting that the model does not say enough about the communication processes involved in the mobilisation of riot participants beyond the flashpoints incident. They are equally correct in maintaining that there are known instances of rioting in which, not one, but several flashpoints occur - sometimes at differing locations and separate points in time, making it justifiable to refer to a collection of 'mini' or 'satellite' riots, each with the capacity to 'create their own little history during the course of the day' (ibid., p. 21).

Following our earlier attempts to address these observations (Waddington and King, 2005), the model is more explicit now in asserting that the escalation of major disorders beyond the flashpoint itself is a consequence of mobilisation resulting, not only from word of mouth, but also from the activation of social media and other forms of mass communication (Kotronaki and Seferiades, 2012). The model assumes that these processes not only have the capacity to promote and justify the expansion and intensification of conflict and destruction, but also to further unify and embolden the participants, especially in cases where the police are outnumbered or perceived to be lacking in resolve (Drury and Reicher, op. cit.). It also presupposes that corresponding behavioural and communicative interventions by the police or other intermediaries (or *failures to intervene* in circumstances where such action might be warranted) can impact at our interactional and contextual levels, respectively, in such ways as to exacerbate or pacify the conflict. This potential will be most apparent in cases where interventions of this nature are imbued with additional significance relating to one or more of our remaining levels of analysis.

The model's potential to provide an exhaustive explanatory framework for both of the episodes of rioting in question is apparent in a recent study by Sutterlüty (2014), whose 'five parallels' between the disorders in France and England (namely, their extremely similar 'triggers of unrest', the recent traditions of rioting in each country, their 'shared social structural characteristics' of poverty and inferior life chances, the presence of 'stigmatizing discourses about the disadvantaged', and *police work and security policies* marked by unwarranted and discriminatory intervention) strongly allude to variables embodied in the model.

An even more explicit endorsement of the model's potential is provided by Body-Gendrot (2013), who applauds its capacity to accurately identify a range of 'explanatory dimensions' of relevance to each country ('economic hardship, lack of life chances, political disenfranchisement, police-youth tensions, rumours, street cultures and territorial contests'). Indeed Body-Gendrot draws explicitly on elements of the flashpoints model (the idea of a 'triggering or precipitating event') in her own four-stage 'interactive framework'. Moreover, while the scope of her study is largely limited to issues of socioeconomic exclusion and deprivation, the analysis does hint at the importance of other factors highlighted in the flashpoints model, such as police-public relations and the role of group values, beliefs and identities.

Having established the nature and value of the flashpoints model as an analytical framework, it will now be applied to the French riots of 2005 and the English riots of 2011. In each case, the analysis will be presented in two parts: a discussion of the conditions forming the background to the disorder will be followed by consideration of the trigger and subsequent escalation of the violence. This systematic approach will allow for a more structured and nuanced understanding of the commonalities underpinning these major episodes of collective disorder.

French Riots of 2005

Background conditions

Sutterlüty is undoubtedly well-justified in pointing to key predisposing conditions at the structural level of the flashpoints model as causal factors in the rioting that took place in France. The relevant set of circumstances have their origins in the highly successful post-war French economic rejuvenation of 1945 to 1975, which owed much to the contribution of the tens of thousands of northern and sub-Saharan African workers who were recruited from the former French colonies. As temporary workers became permanent settlers, France was faced with an acute housing crisis. The response to this crisis came in the form of an urban policy that located these workers and their families on out-of-town high-rise housing complexes, which progressively became concentrations of the most underprivileged members of French society. The population of the *banlieues* became socially and economically excluded, and poor transport provision only helped to reinforce their physical, as well as psychological segregation (Oberti, 2008). It is in this prolonged period of social, cultural and economic decline that the problems that characterise the contemporary French suburbs are rooted.

The onset of the twenty-first century brought with it a world-wide economic downturn, resulting in widespread deindustrialisation and the impoverishing and demoralising effect of a youth unemployment rate which averaged 30% in the French cités and was as high as 85% in some of the most badly hit 'hot spots' of major cities like Paris (Silverstein and Tetreault 2006). The employment prospects of male ethnic minority youths were further handicapped by poor school provision, correspondingly low academic attainment (including an annual drop-out rate of 31%), and patterns of employment discrimination that were inseparable from the stigmatization of the housing projects (Mucchielli, 2009).

Many local youths have culturally adapted to these adverse conditions and their perceived lack of political representation (*ibid.*) by adopting the 'gangsta' sensibilities redolent of urban African-American youth street culture. Among their more notable 'survival strategies' are propensities towards drug dealing, petty delinquency, toughness, intense solidarity and a territorial attitude involving the sanctity of the immediate neighbourhood (Roy, 2005). Problematically, the French *banlieues* have also been increasingly depicted by the mass media and other primary definers, not only as hotbeds of youth criminality, but as possible breeding and recruiting grounds for 'Islamic fundamentalism':

From the 1990s onwards, the term 'beur' became increasingly associated with Islamist fundamentalism and terrorism and its use became almost exclusively pejorative. Newspapers spoke of the *banlieues* as a source of 'little beur soldiers' and 'suicide bombers' for Islamist fanatics, with the result that young beurs in particular came to be seen as a dangerous 'enemy within'. (Sutterlüty, 2014, p. 42)

The French police have responded to such characterisations with increasing levels of repression and militarization, including the deployment of surveillance teams, plain-clothed officers and riot police (Bonelli, 2007). Following the French general election of 2002, the new Minister of the Interior (Nicolas Sarkozy) withdrew existing community policing programmes in favour of cracking down on 'quality of life' crimes, such as aggressive begging, loitering in hallways and riding without paying on public transport. The infamous *contrôles d'identités*, long a source of tension in the *banlieues*, became more frequent and insults and provocation became part of daily life as police sought to disperse gatherings of young people and impose their authority

‘on the street’ (Moran, 2011; Schneider, 2008).

The interplay of institutional/organisational, cultural and situational factors becomes particularly relevant here. Mouhanna (2009) emphasises how the French national police policy of deploying police officers, via a centralised authority, into localities that are some distance removed (both geographically *and* culturally) from their places of origin has been detrimental to police-civilian relations. Such officers are required to serve for two years in notoriously ‘difficult’ neighbourhoods (invariably, the *banlieues*) as a precondition for a less demanding assignment elsewhere. The implication of all this is that the *banlieues* are being repressively patrolled by officers lacking any sensitivity to local cultural sensibilities and with no incentive to cultivate a positive long term relationship with local residents. Not surprisingly, situations have developed in which the neighbourhoods concerned are seen, on the one hand, as potential ‘no-go areas’ to be repressively controlled; and on the other as territories to be defended against an unwanted and illegitimate army of occupation (Roy, *op. cit.*).

Against this longstanding backdrop of tense police-public relations and anti-police sentiment, a number of contextual factors assume considerable significance. It has been widely argued that a succession of controversial statements by the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy contributed to the eventual rioting of October/November 2005 (Body-Gendrot, *op. cit.*; Jobard, 2008; Mucchielli, 2006). In the summer before the rioting occurred, Mr Sarkozy paid a visit to a north Parisian housing estate on which, one day earlier, an 11-year-old boy had been accidentally shot dead in crossfire between local gangs. Reflecting the uncompromising attitude with which he was increasingly becoming associated, Sarkozy made a promise to local residents that, ‘The louts will disappear. We will clean this estate with a Karcher’ (Godoy, 2005) – a high-pressure hose used for removing caked-on grime from cars or buildings.

It is possible that these sentiments may have been germane to the events that subsequently arose when the Minister for the Interior visited a similar estate in Agenteuil on 25 October, a mere two days before the rioting broke out. An 8 o’clock news report of the day’s events shows Mr Sarkozy walking down the estate’s main thoroughfare, under the protective gaze of a surrounding team of police officers. However, the camera suddenly pans out to reveal a more troublesome state of affairs:

Along the street, throngs of agitated youths chant in unison: ‘Sarko, on t’encule! Sarko, on t’encule!’ (‘Sarko, up yours!’) Then the camera jerks to refocus on the Minister of the Interior as he ducks to avoid something. The news commentator explains that angry young people are throwing rocks and other objects at him. Aides rush to Sarkozy’s side, protecting his head, first with a briefcase, then an umbrella. In the next scene, police officers scan the crowd. ‘Over here’, one yells into a walkie-talkie while pointing at a group of hooded adolescents fleeing down a dark side alley. The segment ends by returning to Sarkozy, who, looking up, presumably at a resident in one of the bleak cement high-rises, comments, ‘You’ve had enough, huh? You’ve had enough of this bunch of *racaille* [scum]? Well, we’re going to get rid of them for you.’ (Murphy, 2011, p. 38)

Sarkozy’s description of the ‘*racaille*’ was perceived as a direct insult by many residents, compounding the discrimination that permeates life in the suburbs by publicly verbalizing the stigma that has been attached to these areas by mainstream society. His controversial statements added to the frustration of the inhabitants of these areas, moving the situation in the suburbs towards a context where the potential for civil unrest was markedly increased (Moran, 2012).

Trigger and escalation

Academic and journalistic commentators on the French riots have highlighted a number of key dynamic aspects of the disorders, relating to our communication context and interactional levels of analysis, that help us to understand how and why they proliferated so widely and with such rapid effect beyond their point of instigation. There can be no doubting that it was the highly emotive and symbolically significant incident involving the electrocution of the two youths from Clichy-sous-Bois and the immediate outrage it generated that provided the initial ‘flashpoint’ for the French riots of 2005. The incendiary effect of this incident was exacerbated by the conspicuous absence of any attempt by the government or security authorities to ‘pacify’ the local population via apologetic or conciliatory remarks:

During the hours following the incident the Minister of Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, accused the three youngsters of involvement in a burglary but denied that they had been chased... Neither the police nor the government made any gesture of compassion or respect towards the grieving parents and relatives of the boys. (Fassin, 2006, p.1)

Roché and Maillard make the related point that had Mr Sarkozy deliberately ‘set out to increase alienation and defiance, he could not have chosen a more effective tactic’ (2009, p. 36).

The further unification and antagonism of, not only the local residents of Clichy-sous-Bois, but those of wider communities in Paris and beyond, was provoked by subsequent escalatory interventions (both interactional and communicative) on the part of the authorities. A temporary optimism that the initial violence may have been abating was aroused when a peaceful march by 500 people took place on the night of 29-30 October. Many of those involved wore t-shirts proclaiming ‘Dead for nothing’ in honour of the two boys (Mucchielli, 2009). However, such progress was then nullified on the evening of 30 October when two officers pursuing a group of youths directed a gas grenade into entrance of a mosque where worshippers were saying prayers for Ramadan. Scores of those present were forced to evacuate the building for fear of asphyxiation. However, here too Mr Sarkozy refused to concede that the police had any reason for contrition (Schneider, 2008). As Jobard (2008, p. 1290) points out, this atrocity ‘acted as a powerful mechanism of boundary activation’, fostering a pronounced ‘us versus them’ mentality throughout the length and breadth of French society (Jobard, 2008, p. 1290).

The move by the French government to impose curfew legislation dating back to the Algerian war of 1955 had yet another inflammatory, rather than pacifying, effect. As one 21-year-old from Clichy-sous-Bois complained to Henley (2005),

On the radio they said the last time they used that law was in the Algerian war. Is that stupid or what? Ninety percent of the people who live here are Arabs. What does that tell them? Fifty years later, you’re still different? We’re not allowed outside, and everyone else is?

On a larger scale, the use of social media and digital communications played a role in amplifying the violence. During the riots, mobile phone use was ‘cited repeatedly by politicians, mainstream media, and bloggers as the preferred frontline communication medium of the rioters and young residents of the banlieues’ (Russell, 2007, p.290). Furthermore, with mainstream media limiting their coverage of the riots – certain editors and journalists were wary of inciting further violence and encouraging support for far right politicians – those with comments and opinions turned to online blogs to spread their message (ibid.). A proliferation of information online

added to the content of established media outlets and played a role in uniting spatially disparate suburban communities, creating what may be described as a sort of virtual community (Moran, 2012). In this context, young people from *banlieues* across the nation, sharing similar experiences of injustice and situated firmly within the ‘us versus them’ paradigm, became connected with the original event and gained what they regarded as legitimacy for their violent acts.

It is evident from the observations of commentators like Roché and Maillard (op. cit.) that the problems caused by these inadvertent tendencies to solidify opposition towards the police were aggravated by consistent signs of police ineffectualness and disarray, which emboldened the riot participants and encouraged greater violence. These authors maintain (ibid., pp. 37-39) that two key institutional/organisational features of the policing of the riots – i.e. the fact that they were centrally co-ordinated, at the regional (*department*), rather than the local (*circonscription*) level, and the fact that this involved the ‘segmentation’ of police services (into public security forces, the *Compagnies Républicains de Sécurité*, gendarmerie mobile, etc.) – produced serious confusion and disorganisation. Different police units were therefore required to intervene without possessing any real idea of their ‘reciprocal roles’ or having an adequate knowledge of the local people or territory involved. Key strategic space and initiative was thus conceded to the rioters (ibid., p. 38). It was only when the decision was taken to transfer tactical command from the departments to local level that the rioting was eventually quelled.

In-depth interviews undertaken by journalists and academics confirm that the meanings and motives attached to the burning and destruction that characterised the riots were linked, primarily, to the salient and highly proximate matter of police harassment. Thus, at one level, anger and ‘protest’ was focussed both on the police and the person ultimately held responsible for their intensely discriminatory and unacceptable behaviour. In the words of one 18-year-old rioter, it was:

Les keufs, man, the cops. They’re Sarkozy’s and Sarkozy must go, he has to shut his mouth, say sorry or just fuck off. He shows no respect. He calls us animals, he says he’ll clean the cités with a power hose. He’s made it worse, man. Every car that goes up, that’s one more message for him. (quoted by Henley, 2005)

Insofar as such individuals were concerned, the spectacle of burning cars provided an ideal, camera-friendly method of ‘getting the message across to Sarkozy’ and the rest of French society that such police behaviour had to stop (Duvall Smith, 2005).

The riots were also underpinned by a second, more latent issue: the failure of the state to counter the processes of exclusion that have left the population of the suburbs (particularly ethnic minorities) marginalised from mainstream society. In this context, there is a strong link between the behaviour of the rioters at the interactional level and the broader structural and political levels. The riots represented a rejection of their situation by an angry and disillusioned population, and it is clear in interviews conducted by Mucchielli that the targets of the rioters’ actions were heavily influenced by collective feelings of ‘injustice, abandonment and rejection’:

When I see some friends and my big brother, who have diplomas and five years beyond high school and they work in supermarkets as security guards, how crazy can you get?! I don’t get it. They got an education, they worked at it, and after that they end up [like that], it’s not fair. So you see that school only brings a tough life, in the end. During the riots, I wanted to participate real serious, ‘cause those bastards in society they don’t give a

damn about us, they're paid tons and tons, and they don't even do their job of supporting problem students. So I'm telling you the truth, I burned some cars near the high school to show them that we exist and that we're not going to let them fuck us over like fuck. (op. cit., p. 742)

These feelings of abandonment are the product of structural problems that have engendered academic failure and unemployment in the *banlieues*. Inextricably enmeshed among these key structural factors is the related issue of political marginalisation. A number of commentators have highlighted the political significance of the 2005 riots, arguing that the majority of participants viewed the violence as the only means of making their grievances heard in the political arena from which they are excluded (Lapeyronnie, 2006; Moran, 2012). This interpretation is borne out by the fact that the violence and destruction was not indiscriminate. Mucchielli (2009) points out that 80 per cent of property destroyed was state-owned and included police stations and town halls.

The English Riots of 2011

Background conditions

In order to fully understand the corresponding motives and meanings of the English riots of 2011, it is necessary to begin by distinguishing between the relevant predisposing factors in English society generally, and those especially relating to the area of north London where the rioting initially broke out.

At the time of the English riots, the UK economy was still reeling from the effects of the world-wide 'banking crisis', which had catapulted the major western stock markets into what Kellner (2012) refers to as a 'downward spiralling freefall'. The 'Coalition government' presided over by the Conservative prime minister, David Cameron, had responded to this trauma by subscribing to an 'austerity agenda', predicated on reducing public sector, welfare and education budgets, which disproportionately affected the young and poor – but not the wealthiest section of British society, including the bankers, whose expensive bonus payments seemed scarcely to have been affected (*ibid.*). Worst affected of all were those poor, ethnic minority communities, like the Broadwater Farm estate and the other London venues affected by the rioting, which, as Sutterlüti (*op. cit.*) points out, were all characterised by chronically high levels of youth unemployment, failing schools, and poor levels of educational attainment.

In cultural terms, the 'volatile and alienated young men' occupying these communities had adapted to their predicament via 'coping mechanisms' designed to 'compensate for the failure to provide jobs and work by attempting to find respect through alternative means, often through illegal means' (Hallsworth and Brotherton, 2011, p. 10). Such strategies have sometimes taken the extreme forms of drug dealing, burglaries, street robberies and gang-related conflict. As Hallsworth and Brotherton explain, there have been corresponding political/ideological pressures on the police – in the form of successive moral panics – to urgently get to grips with criminal ('cultural') activities of this nature.

The ways in which the police recalibrated their policies in response to this enhanced political pressure (institutional/organisational level) greatly impacted on contemporary day-to-day police-community relations (contextual level). The revised police strategy involved an enhanced reliance on specialist 'gun crime' and surveillance units, combined with a greater day-to-day emphasis on 'stopping and searching' local residents whom they regarded with suspicion, designated a

more prominent role for Operation Trident, and encouraged increasingly more pervasive ‘stop and search’ procedures – invariably carried out by officers from outside the locality. Widespread complaints that the latter approach was dangerously indiscriminate were substantiated by statistical evidence that, of the 6,894 stops carried out by police officers in Tottenham and the surrounding area of Haringey between April and June 2011, only 87 resulted in convictions.

But it was not just the quantity of stop and searches that became the issue. It was the manner in which these searches were conducted. There was a strong and shared sense of being treated unfairly and without due respect. This generated a sense of grievance and of anger (Reicher and Stott, 2011, p. 73).

Similar alienation and antagonism resulted from the deployment of specialist units (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011). It is indicative of the ‘distant’ yet pervasive nature of such personnel that, on the occasion of Mark Duggan’s arrest, Trident officers were accompanied by armed officers from C019 (the MPS Specialist Firearm Command) and armed surveillance officers from SCD11 (the force Surveillance Command) in an operation ‘that crossed a number of North London boroughs’ (MPS, 2012, p. 20). Also fuelling local community anger was the spiralling resentment and distrust resulting from a recent history of deaths relating to police raids or detention in police custody, of which the shooting of Mark Duggan was merely the latest example (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011). Earlier in the year, on 15 March, a protest had taken place outside of the MPS’s headquarters at Scotland Yard, where speakers referred to ‘everyday experiences of harassment, beatings and unexplained deaths’, and warned the police and politicians of impending unrest (Reicher and Stott, *op. cit.*).

Contrary to popular assumption, the killing of Mark Duggan was not the flashpoint of the riot. Rather, it made a highly significant contribution to a communication context marked by intensifying hostility. This state of affairs was inadvertently compounded by the fact that, following Duggan’s death, his case was immediately referred (in line with an MPS standard operating procedure) to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), for the purpose of investigation. This process required that any formal narrative of events would be withheld, pending the outcome of inquiry. A few leaked comments from within the MPS aside, the lack of a formal explanation of events led to intense speculation that the police had something sinister to hide – including the possibility that Duggan had been deliberately ‘assassinated’ (MPS, *op. cit.*). It was in response to this communication deficit that the collective decision was arrived at to stage a protest march and ‘vigil’ outside the local police station – as clear a ‘target of derision’ as could ever be imagined in these very difficult circumstances.

Trigger and escalation

A correspondent of the British Guardian newspaper explained how the 200-strong protest assumed the character of a long-established ritual: ‘When something bad occurs affecting the fragile relationship between the police and the black community in Tottenham – a controversial arrest, a death in custody – people march from the estates to the police station (Muir, 2011). In keeping with this tradition, the march progressed according to ‘textbook design’, with women and children taking the lead. The police had been given advance notification as per usual, and Muir describes how the protest showed all the customary precision of a well-practised dance routine, except that, ‘On Saturday 6 August, the choreography went badly awry’.

The prescribed steps in this well-rehearsed ‘pattern of accommodation’ required that protest organisers would be welcomed into the station by an appropriately high-ranking officer (generally, of superintendent level or above), who would grant them an adequate opportunity to frankly discuss their grievances. This time, though, the leaders of the march were initially

informed them there was no possibility of their being allowed to discuss the matter as it was now in the hands of the IPCC. They were also told that, in any case, the relevant senior officers were currently unavailable, having been deployed at a nearby Premier League football match at White Hart Lane. A Chief Inspector was eventually brought in, but this still failed to satisfy the protesters, who were adamant that a more senior officer should at least show the courtesy of addressing Duggan's family. Ultimately, the call was sent out for a superintendent to make a special visit to the station, but he or she had not managed to arrive by the time that most protesters decided to leave in frustrated fashion a matter of two hours later. This perceived 'breakdown of accommodation' was pivotal to the riot's immediate escalation. It was just as the last of their number were departing that the first signs of disorder emerged (*ibid.*).

Police accounts maintained that the trigger for this disorder was the action of a group of local youths who, incensed by the apparent police indifference towards the march, began throwing missiles at parked up police cars and seemed intent on storming the station (*ibid.*). However, Reicher and Stott (2011, p. 80) insist that the actual 'flashpoint' occurred in the course of a police attempt to disperse what remained of the departing crowd, thereby creating a 'sterile zone' to the north and south of the station. It was at this point that they allegedly bundled a 16-year-old black woman to the ground and began hitting her repeatedly.

Eye-witnesses quoted by Lewis (2011) agree that the incident occurred when the woman angrily stepped forward in remonstrance:

[One man], who was in a nearby church, described seeing the girl throw a leaflet and what may have been a stone at police. [He] said the girl was then "pounded by 15 riot shields". "She went down on the floor but once she managed to get up she was hit again before being half-dragged away by her friend."

An elderly woman quoted by Brown added that, from where she was standing, just behind the girl, 'I saw the policeman lift his fist and punch her right in her mouth, as he did that I ran over to her and her mouth was bleeding, and from when that fist hit the girl, the riots started.' This version is endorsed by Reicher and Stott, who emphasise how 'All those who describe the incident agree that this was what actually 'sparked off all the riots' (*op cit.*, pp. 81-82). The 'intensifying' fact that the police 'victim' was little more than a girl undoubtedly reinforced the incident's catalytic value.

Ensuing processes of interaction quickly contributed to the proliferation of disorder. The instantaneous transmission via word of mouth and social media of rumours that the police had attacked a girl proved massively incendiary. Thus, as Lewis explains, 'In a YouTube clip showing burning police cars and violent pitched battles more than an hour later, a rioter can be heard goading others: "Didn't you see the girl getting roughed by the Feds, man? Come on.'" Versions of the incident were soon alleging that the girl in question was only 10-years-old, or that she was carrying a child (Brown, *op. cit.*). Further impetus was given to the rioting when the video went viral one day later (*ibid.*). It is evident that social media discussion of this nature, linking the police killing of Mark Duggan and their abuse of the teenage girl to wider perceptions of injustice, played a key role in the escalation of the riots – creating a highly 'combustible' nationwide communication context and enhanced feelings of opposition and solidarity:

A notable effect of new social media was that these mediums engendered a sense of social cohesion by connecting actors from disparate geographies into a common symbolic space. While new social media did not initiate the unrest, by representing one man's death as

a vivid symbol of widespread social injustice, what I refer to as a 'social tragedy'...these emergent mediums played a key role in facilitating the events, (Baker, 2012, pp. 175-6)

Key institutional/organisational factors continued to have a bearing on events. The MPS's own review of the riots (MPS, 2012) recognises that the inadequacy of the force's early response to disorder played a crucial role in its subsequent escalation. Factors residing at the institutional/organisational level are important to our understanding of why this was the case. Uppermost among these was the fact that the key 'Service Mobilisation Plan', requiring all force boroughs to urgently provide public order-trained officers at times of 'heightened demand', was not properly implemented (*ibid.*, p. 40). Due to human error, an 'Amber message' was sent out to borough commanders, asking them merely to identify available resources, when the gravity of the situation really warranted a 'Red message', demanding the immediate mobilisation of resources. This oversight subsequently became apparent and was quickly acted upon. However, the MPS report accepts that the net effect was that 'the number of officers was not [initially] enough, and they did not arrive quickly enough to deal with the speed with which the violence escalated' (*ibid.*).

In the riot's early stages, participants appeared to respond to the evidence of their own eyes (i.e. at the interactional level) that the police were too few in number, and too disorganised to resist, by breaking through police lines and setting fire to their vehicles (Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2011). Thereafter, social media appears to have played another important role in the riots – by highlighting the police's inability to adequately cope with the violence, looting and destruction. Thus:

At first, the belief that the police would not be able to stop rioting incidents was relatively localised to the London area. Riots on Sunday 7 August were within an 18km radius of Tottenham. Those who rioted on Sunday were again felt to have been unchallenged and confidence among potential rioters in other parts of the country grew. By Monday, riots had spread nationally. (*ibid.*, p. 48)

Like their French counterparts, the vast majority of participants in the English disorders attributed their involvement to poor police-community relations. When asked afterwards what had been their main motives for engaging in the riots, 85% of respondents in the 'Reading the Riots' survey (Guardian/LSE, 2011) referred to a desire to exact revenge on the police for 'all the grief they have caused to communities'. The survey further reveals that 'looting' was not an activity engaged in by the vast majority of people involved, thereby undermining, as Platts-Fowler (2013, p. 21) puts it, the 'explanatory power of personal greed or consumerism'. She shares the view of commentators like Reicher and Stott (*op. cit.*) and Sutterlüty (*op. cit.*) that any material benefits resulting from such behaviour were secondary in importance to the primary desire to 'teach the police a lesson' and demonstrate that they were no longer in control. As Reicher and Stott point out, 'The pleasure that people got from doing so was palpable' (*op. cit.*, p. 91).

This is not to suggest that all such behaviour was directed universally at the police. Structural factors were clearly of crucial importance. The post-riot interviews carried out by the authors of the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel report, re-emphasised the feelings of hopelessness and political marginalisation experienced by contemporary English youth:

In our visits to many deprived areas, we observed a sense of hopelessness. Many young people we met felt that goals many people take for granted such as getting a job or going to college or university were unachievable for them. They believed that they were bearing

the brunt of cuts caused by irresponsible bankers who had enriched themselves at the cost of others: 'There are double standards in morality' and were bitter about the rise in tuition fees and the removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance. (2011, p. 102)

Reicher and Stott's extremely nuanced overview and analysis of the disorders does much to recommend the notion of 'satellite' riots occurring in the wake, but beyond the immediate location, of the initial outbreak of conflict. As predicted by Otten et al. (op. cit.) these secondary disturbances varied in the nature of their instigation, and revealed contrasting emphases on the underlying issues involved. Thus, for example, the ensuing disorder in Hackney was triggered by an encounter between a black youth and police officers which crystallised longstanding antagonism between the police and local residents. It seems likely that, by contrast, the apparently unprovoked and 'gleeful' attacks on people and property occurring in the more affluent London suburbs of Croydon and Ealing were a reflection of the perceived austerity measures and political hypocrisy impacting on the younger generation.

Conclusion

While some academic studies have sought to comparatively analyse the French riots of 2005 with those that occurred in England in 2011, these have been limited in their scope and depth. In the above discussion, we set out a more comprehensive analysis of these episodes of collective disorder through the application of the Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder. This approach allows us to engage with both the background causes (long- and short-term) that facilitated the build-up of a profound anger and frustration, and the 'triggering' event that prompted this latent potential for violence to take form in the riots. In this context, a number of important commonalities can be identified across the events under study.

First, comparison of the French and English riots reveals that in both cases, the disorder took place in contexts characterised by economic deprivation and long-term social decline. This finding reinforces previous research by the second author into the causes of rioting in the United Kingdom and France since the 1980s (King and Waddington, 2009) and reveals a well-established pattern of social exclusion and political marginalisation in both contexts.

Second, poor police-public relations represented an important factor influencing the outbreak and subsequent escalation of the riots. In both England and France, the police are viewed in terms of an 'us versus them' opposition in those areas affected by collective disorder. This opposition has been reinforced by incidents arising from the often humiliating *contrôles d'identité* in France and the intrusive 'stop and search' procedures in England. Furthermore, a track record of police discrimination and violence in both cases has led to the construction of an interpretative framework that positions the young people of deprived areas as victims. This reinforces the 'us versus them' paradigm and gives legitimacy to any related disorder. In France, for example, almost every episode of rioting in the *banlieues* since the 1980s has been triggered by the injury or death of a local resident in an incident involving police. This collective memory serves as a powerful lens through which each new episode of police violence (real or perceived) is viewed and contributes greatly to creating a context that is conducive to disorder.

Third, while the riots themselves were triggered by a particularly emotive event, the violence was escalated by the immediate communicative response of the state. In both cases, poor or inaccurate communication in the wake of the respective tragedies was interpreted as either a lack of respect or a sign that the authorities were attempting to shirk any causal responsibility for events. In the French case, Nicolas Sarkozy incorrectly accused the youngsters of involvement in

a burglary and absolved the police of any blame, while in the English case the refusal to provide a formal explanation of events (the fact that this was due to the requirements of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) inquiry was lost on protesters) prompted speculation of a cover-up by the authorities.

Fourth, social media and digital communications appear to have contributed to the escalation of the violence. In both France and England, these media played a unifying role by providing a virtual space for communication and information dissemination amongst relevant young people. In this context, the actual distance separating communities became less of an obstacle as those participating in the riots became part of an 'imagined' community of text and images. This community was 'imagined' in the sense that its members accepted and engaged with its size and momentum, without ever coming into contact with the majority of the others making up the community (Anderson, 1983).

Beyond highlighting for analysis the features common to both the French and English riots, the analysis demonstrates the continued relevance of the flashpoints model as a robust conceptual framework within which the anatomy of collective disorder can be dissected and understood. The layered nature of the flashpoints model encourages a broad approach to the analysis of riots and draws attentions to points of overlap and tension between the various causal factors that influence the outbreak of collective disorder.

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