

Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The riots one year on

A report for the BSA Youth Study group

Over the past year, academics have brought critical perspectives to bear on the complex causes and consequences of the English riots of 2011. The [BSA](#) has itself played an important role in this debate. Important questions have been raised about the relationship between the riots and the increasingly hostile conditions of neoliberalism and Coalition policies, including: growing unemployment, rising tuition fees, the withdrawal of the EMA, cuts to Sure Start and an overhaul of welfare provision. Re-visiting the causes, consequences and *ongoing* effects of the riots has been vital, particularly when key policy figures, such as London Mayor Boris Johnson and Prime Minister David Cameron have dismissed the need for any sociological analysis, claiming the rioters were simply driven by pure criminality, greed and opportunism.

On the 28th September 2012 [The Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research](#) (London South Bank University) and the [Institute for Policy Studies in Education](#) (London Metropolitan University) held a one day collaborative conference '[Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The Riots One Year On](#)'. Speakers came from (non)academic communities and different disciplinary perspectives to variously interrogate the relationship between the riots and re-shaped inequalities of race, class, place, gender, sexuality in a post-crash, austerity era. Through paper sessions and panel discussions, contributors offered fresh interpretations and analysis on issues related to the riots and the BSA including: youth unemployment; education futures; stop and search; political activism; parenting; public sociology; and media framing of the riots and rioters.

Illustrating the importance of the BSA Youth Study Group, speakers consistently and powerfully underlined the need to attend to growing inequalities characterising young people's lives within [an age of austerity](#): Ojeaku Nwabuzo of the Runnymede Trust described the everyday racism and sense of injustice experienced by black and minority ethnic youth, while Lisa McKenzie (University of Nottingham) spoke of the sense of alienation experienced among young men on the St. Ann's council estate in Nottingham. Les Back (Goldsmiths) described a generation of young people with nothing to lose and called for a new public debate about the kinds of futures that young people face; likewise, Valerie Hey (Sussex University) made a passionate plea for inter-generational compassion and care. These important interventions provided provocation and inspiration for those working in the field of the Sociology of Youth and illuminated a renewed urgency for critical, sociologically-informed research about young people's lived experiences of education, work, housing, welfare, public spaces and personal relationships.

The Autumn edition of the BSA *Network* magazine will include a feature on the event, and commentary can also be found on the [Weeks Centre blog](#). A further insight into the conference can

be found in the reports, featured below, from the four postgraduate students who received funded places from the BSA Youth Study Group.

The organisers (Kim Allen, Yvette Taylor, Sumi Hollingworth and Ayo Mansaray) would like to thank the BSA Youth Study Group, and Steve Roberts especially, for supporting this conference and enabling postgraduate and early career researchers to be part of this important dialogue.

Nicola Horsley, Weeks Centre, London South Bank University

In welcoming delegates to what would prove to be a provocative and enlightening conference, Yvette Taylor recounted the distillation of an hour's conversation into a sound-bite that appeared on the [Times Higher Education website](#) and considered what might be lost or gained by the reduction of ideas to measured forms. A sense of scale and balance came to characterise the day's discussions, with Ken Roberts' question of "why *don't* (some) people riot?" answered from a number of perspectives. Les Back cited a You Tube clip of young people making "a calculation about what they had to lose" as evidence of a tangible metric that governed those who opted out of riotous behaviour. This point was later taken up by Owen Jones in his comment that rioters' diffuse individual motivations were brought together by having "no secure future to risk". My interest in the conference stemmed from my research into young people's perceptions of citizenship and it was my data on negative, often criminalised, representations of youth that appeared in young people's narratives of their place in society that my paper focused on.

I was therefore interested to hear Jones' comments on young people's projections of their futures and his suggestion of a gradual accumulation of injustices in a community's collective memory, such as the "constant, low-level harassment" of stop-and-search. Teddy Nygh's connection of frayed police relations after the deaths of local youths in custody, which he claimed "build up to a boiling point", also spoke to this theme. Ojeaku Nwabuzo suggested high and low profile injustices were inextricably linked in this collective consciousness. She argued that Mark Duggan's death had "triggered" memories of injustice, just as individual incidences of stop-and-search cannot be separated from the wider discourse of which they are part.

This dual concern for macro and micro level practices was voiced by Geoff Bright in his analysis of acts of defiance in both dissent movements and the episodic 'refusals' of young people in education. Questions of scale were also raised by Tracey Jensen's analysis of 'cruel optimisms' such as the virtue of thrift, as she quoted George Osborne, who equated his spending review with the behaviour of "every solvent household in the country". I was especially interested to hear other speakers making connections between everyday agency

and representations of empowerment at policy level as my own work questions how macro level changes to young people's empowerment can be achieved if they are denied agency in their everyday interactions with teachers.

A similar consideration of depth had driven Teddy Nygh to take to the streets to participate in a "deeper conversation" in the wake of the riots. He found young people were frustrated by their representation in the media and that terms like 'chavs', 'hoodies' and 'NEETs' "de-humanise" individuals as much as racist comments like David Starkey's assertion that "whites are becoming black", which Katie Blood discussed earlier in the day. The intersections of 'race' and class in such 'de-humanisation' also came to the fore when panel member Lisa McKenzie described the criminalisation of residents of St. Anne's in Nottingham. As I am familiar with this area, I thought it provided a useful example of lived experiences beyond the context of London. I was also intrigued to hear Geoff Bright's comment that a nine o'clock curfew was in place in some villages in North Derbyshire and these insights from communities in the Midlands reminded me that our discussions of events such as the riots can tend towards a London-centric view, which should be challenged by those from elsewhere.

The first panel's theme of 'reflections' prompted discussion of the 'chav' as a racialised 'white Other' and the implications of guilt inherent in reporting that referred to Mark Duggan only by his surname, which was contrasted with representations of 'Mr Tomlinson' after a similarly controversial death during G-20 summit protests. Clifford Stott urged that 'the riots' should also be properly identified, rather than rendered 'mindless' and Gillian Slovo agreed the riots were diffuse in nature. Tottenham's events were said to stem from a "traditional race riot" that "turned into an anti-police riot that turned into a consumer riot". The broadcasting of Tottenham police's failure to react, however, galvanised rioters elsewhere, with various targets chosen by those "with not enough to lose". Later in the day, Emma Casey explored the role of consumption in the riots and the flawed proposition that consumerism offers freedom. Casey's conclusion that opportunities to acquire value or mobility are being eroded spoke to the theme of young people's 'manufactured choices' in my paper, as well as Gill Hughes' assertion (following Steph Lawler) that young people are presented as the 'wrong kind of selves'.

The second panel session considered 'futures' and Valerie Hey began with the statement that "the present is not what we expected of the future then". She considered a cycle of excess followed by punishment to be "a very English phenomenon" but suggested that our current culture of possessive individualism without accountability threatens "fairness" and "decency" in public life. Neo-liberal visions of the future were troubled by Val Gillies as she considered Roseman's question of "why does neo-liberalism hate kids?" and suggested that young people's symbolism as the vessels through which the future is imagined conveys a certain power to disrupt order that is deemed threatening and has led to increasingly punitive

practices in schools. Daniel Silver went on to problematise the positioning of police officers as working to improve futures by consulting with communities.

Overall, delegates were united in a call for a sense of scale that remembered the real people that have been reduced to subjects of discourse. Geoff Bright's critique of 'monstrous' representations that allow property to be prioritised over people, and Tracey Gore's analysis of policies being introduced in Liverpool – which will see poor people and 'split' families hit hard by universal credit and 'bedroom tax', leaving them with "no hope" – supported Lisa McKenzie's call for "real people's stories" to be heard.

Johanne Miller, University of the West of Scotland

I am a full time PhD student in my third year at The University of the West of Scotland. My research fits into the sociology of youth. It is part of my PhD research which explores youth gangs in a Glasgow context. I am at the analysis and writing up stage my thesis: 'In Every Scheme There is a Team: An exploration of Glasgow Gangs'. My thesis aims three main aims: Put forward a definition of a Glasgow gang; Explore Glasgow gang culture; Place the concept of gangs back within the context of youth studies.

By providing a definition of a Glasgow gang based on gang involved members interpretations we can review current definitions. Do young people that identify with gangs have the same meaning as the canonical definitions in society? This has significance, young people are criminalised if they are associated with the term, to the extent those known to be gang associated can be stigmatised and ostracised from their communities. Exploring the voices of young people that are gang members and triangulating this with community and gang practitioner knowledge adds to the growing body of knowledge on gangs within Britain.

The current coalition government laid the blame of the riots with youth gangs, which encouraged negative discourse concerning working class young people, in particular those affiliated with gangs. These myths concerning young people are growing in our current society and I believe the conference attended to the issue that fear of working class youths in society is growing. Importantly, for me, the conference stepped outside the criminological imagination and incorporated an interdisciplinary approach to aide understanding of what happened in 2011. The concept of gangs is a cross disciplinary concept and previously when I have attended conferences they have typically been fixed in one discipline which I feel limits the depth of understanding. This conference moved outside of that realm and took a multi faceted view of what happened and did not just rely on 'our expertise' but took account of practitioners and community members also. I think in academia we can become fixated on being the expert and it was refreshing to be at a conference that recognised knowledge comes from all areas of life.

The most important aspects I feel I gained from the conference were to do with academic discussion and theoretical insights that I had 'off table'. Being able to have critically informed dialogue about your research is difficult to obtain and I feel that it is at conferences where you get the chance to test your own theoretical assumptions and meet people with similar research interests. As a result of the conference I was introduced to thinkers such as Beverley Skeggs which will inform my chapters on culture and methodology. I was also introduced to Yvette Taylor, whose style of writing is very inspirational on class and class cultures which has also opened up avenues of thought for me that I would not have considered before. I think the day was structured very well with the right amount and mix of presenters.

Katie Blood, Nottingham Trent University

My on-going education research PhD explores the decision-making process of 14-16 year old comprehensive/academy school students who are currently navigating and negotiating their next steps beyond compulsory education. The ethnographic study utilises a Bourdieusian 'lens' to investigate the habituses (familial and institutional) of the young people in order to transcend structure/agency accounts regarding young peoples' trajectories. My interest in this area lies in issues relating to social justice, for example persistent disparities in social groups' participation rates in higher education.

The lively and dynamic conference, which included presentations and panel sessions comprising of cross-institutional representation, offered a much needed opportunity to elucidate the civil unrest of 2011. This sociological exploration identified a common demonization of young people (particularly in post-riots discourse) in terms of pejorative language (feral underclass), erroneous 'deficit' labelling (lacking ambition) and simplistic pathological accounts (opportunistic) by politicians and social commentators played out via the media. Contextually, this generation have however come of age at a precarious and fragile time of austerity and recession, serving to foment anxiety and frustration as choices and futures are constrained. Fragmentations within this young age group (race, gender, class and geographical location of residency) were identified as being the key to understanding the layers of existence necessary for an in-depth investigation into the social discontent and the lives of those who participated with 'no secure future to risk' (Owen Jones). This proved a very welcomed alternative to the neo-liberal and nonchalant arguments and policies so favoured and currently being implemented by those in power.

Harriet Cooper, Birkbeck College, University of London

‘Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The Riots One Year On’ was a rich and intense one-day conference of papers and panel discussions analysing the English Riots of August 2011. Whilst my own research, within the field of cultural disability studies, might appear at first glance to be only tangentially related to the themes of the conference, in fact, the day was extremely valuable to me. As an interdisciplinary researcher who enjoys juxtaposing ideas which don’t seem to belong together, I often find that the chance to reflect on events and discourses which are slightly outside of my research area can be incredibly productive. Opportunities such as this always seem to inject new life into my thinking.

My PhD thesis explores the figure of the disabled child in contemporary culture. Although the project resists being placed in a disciplinary pigeonhole, it is in dialogue with work from a range of fields, one of which would be youth studies, or perhaps, more specifically, childhood studies. Whilst disability studies has interrogated the cultural and discursive production of the categories of impairment and disability, scholarship in the field tends to focus on the experience of the disabled adult. My own research seeks to explore the specificity of the experience of the disabled child: to what extent is the disabled child doubly marginalised within society? As I am trained as a researcher in the humanities, my work approaches the disabled child as a ‘figure’ – as a cultural construction. However, I recognise a reciprocal relationship between cultural representations and lived experience in the thesis. Therefore sociology and ethnography, with their emphasis on lived experience, have an important place in my work. Furthermore, I am motivated by a desire to make a politically and ethically engaged contribution to the way we think about how disabled childhoods are ‘made’, and for or me that means attending to insights from lived experience, not least because it is my own lived experience of growing up with a physical impairment which inspired my thesis.

I was interested in the conference because it promised to discuss marginal subjects, subjects who do not – ordinarily – hold power. It was in this sense that the themes of the conference intersected with my own research, in that the disabled child is often a voiceless subject. However, there are major differences in the way in which neoliberal discourse constructs the riotous subject and the disabled subject. The stereotypical rioter is not disabled; the stereotypical disabled person is not a rioter. During the conference I found myself pondering questions including, ‘how does power act differently on the body of the rioter and on the body of the disabled child?’, ‘what is similar and different about these two experiences of being ‘at the edge?’ and ‘what makes one marginal subject a subject of pity, and another a subject of suspicion?’. A nuanced identity politics needs to explore how the inscription of

difference on the body plays a role in creating different experiences of being peripheral to power. As Lisa McKenzie movingly put it, discussing the politics of suspicion, “there is a particular person, who, on a particular night, *cannot go out*”.

As many of the speakers observed, everyone has wanted to have their say about how we ‘read’ the riots. What is the role of the academic in this debate? Martyn Hammersley posed helpful questions in relation to this thorny issue. “What differences are there between the contributions of social scientists and those of *non*-social scientists, including politicians, to public discussion of the riots?”, he asked. In a world in which the boundary between the social sciences and the public sphere is “porous” or even “non-existent”, what claim can sociology make to provide authoritative explanations? Hammersley’s paper was powerful in that it did not attempt to provide definitive answers to these complex questions, but it did leave us with a fascinating proposition – that there may be a difference between social science contributions and those from politicians and others, but that it is “lost in translation, as social science findings are turned into public discourse”. Hammersley asked whether this was “inevitable”, or produced by “distortion of the public sphere”. This point reminded me of Les Back’s observation in *The Art of Listening*, that

[i]n the world of reality TV, tough moral certainties produce a kind of auction of authoritarianism that is pervasive not only in popular media but also in political debates. In a sense, one of the values of the kind of sociological listening I want to argue for is the importance of living with doubt in the service of understanding, of trying to grapple with moral complexity (Back: 2007, pp. 14-15).

If academics have a role to play in ‘reading the riots’ it seems to me that theirs is to practice “attentive listening” (Back: 2007, p. 19). Academia seeks to get behind and beyond the “sound bite”, to avoid reductionism and to manage the anxiety associated with complexity and multiplicity of meaning (Back: 2007, p. 16).

The conference also provoked thought about questions of authenticity, voice and power. Who gets to contribute to the public discourse about the riots? Which voices get heard? As such issues were discussed, I felt very conscious of being a privileged, white middle class woman. I felt that from my position of privilege, it would be inauthentic of me to ‘speak’, to claim to know about the events of August 2011. Instead I wanted to listen. In a fascinating paper which explored the tendency of public discourse to position rather than to ‘listen’ to the riots, Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi observed that the riots have been cast as a-political, as the “lifestyle choice” of a so-called “feral underclass”. The events of August 2011 have been constructed in opposition to earlier moments of civil unrest, such as the Brixton riots, which can safely be described as “political” now that they are unthreateningly historical. The 2011 riots, however, are not allowed to be anything other than “meaningless”. Nunn and Biressi’s paper, as well as subsequent discussions with others on this theme, led

me to consider the following questions: how do we define the “political” and the “a-political”? How are these terms policed? And to what extent do speech acts which attribute meaning, or meaninglessness, to events, commit a kind of ethical violence?

To conclude, attending this conference enriched my thinking about the relationships between power, speech and the body. I spoke to some really inspiring people whose work intersects with my own in interesting and unexpected ways – I hope I will stay in touch with these individuals. As I have said, my research is about the disabled subject – a figure whose representation in contemporary culture is radically different from that of the riotous subject, though both are marginal to power. The papers I heard at the conference provoked thought about this distinction, and the reasons for it. How do materially different bodies come to signify differently in culture? Perhaps, by attending to what is different about each embodied experience of being at the margins, we can develop a more nuanced understanding how of oppression happens.