

THE RIOTS OF 2011 AND THE ROLE OF MULTICULTURALISM

In August 2011, four nights of destruction involving 15,000 rioters, mainly concentrated in London but also occurring elsewhere, resulted in five people dead, over 2,000 arrests and £500 million of damage to property, both modern and irreplaceable Victorian. The *Financial Times* estimated that 48,000 local businesses suffered financially, but perhaps the most serious consequence has been the exposure of underlying social issues. Initial reactions from residents to the scenes unfolding in London, and later across other cities in England, were of shame and confusion. A small minority were obviously enjoying committing arson, looting shops and attacking emergency crews and police. While these were by no means the UK's first riots of modern times, nevertheless the news was received with amazement in other countries, where the UK has an image as a law-abiding democracy: the loss of that image was another cost to the country (Figure 1).

The factors surrounding the most serious bout of civil unrest in a generation continue to be the focus of intense academic and criminal research. At first, the riots were initially blamed on racial tensions, but later research indicates the role of factors other than those of multiculturalism and assimilation.

A brief background to cultural geography

Culture is in essence a system of shared values in any society, influencing lifestyles and creating boundaries for behaviour, and also environments, called **ethnoscapes**. A culture's **values** are basically its ideas about what is good, right, fair, and just. These norms become a tradition over time to the majority core population, and those who do not share the values of the core culture are termed subcultures. **Cultural groups** can be defined in terms of nationality, race, traditions and age.

Culture is dynamic, and external influences, including the influx of overseas migrants, are important.

Figure 1: Youths looting a cycle shop in London in the 2011 riots



Source: Wikimedia Commons. Photo: hughepaul

These newcomers will either resist the core culture they enter, or adopt it, known as **assimilation**. The spread of a culture to new countries produces a **diaspora**.

Multiculturalism is a philosophy which promotes multiple cultures in a society. This philosophy foresees a mosaic of cultures existing side by side, although not necessarily harmoniously or with equality. In many Western countries, multiculturalism has been an official policy since the 1970s, reflecting the growth of different cultural groups in mainly larger cities, as the processes of migration and globalisation have increased.

Some countries such as France hold assimilationist policies, whereby newcomers are expected to conform to mainstream culture. In contrast, in the UK, the Labour governments of the 1970s and 1990s promoted multicultural policies, seeing this as a way to accommodate the huge waves of immigration from Ireland, the Indian subcontinent, and the Caribbean. After 2004 the 'accession' countries from Eastern Europe such as Poland and Romania added to the diversity of British culture.

However, PM David Cameron criticised 'state multiculturalism' in a speech in 2011 on radicalisation and the causes of terrorism. He linked the separate growth of particular cultures to 'home-grown' terrorism, and argued for a stronger UK

identity to prevent extremism. He said the key to achieving true social cohesion is allowing people to say 'I am a Muslim/I am a Hindu/I am a Christian – but I am a Londoner too'.

Can British culture be defined?

The answer is, not easily! The British Council, the UK's international cultural relations organisation, states that UK life is 'an incredible mix of international cultures and contemporary thinking, held together by a strong sense of identity and tradition'. These traditions can still be seen from fish and chips and tea shops, to cricket and fetes. The official 'Life in the UK' immigrant test is a fascinating insight into the official view of core culture. This now includes events like the Notting Hill Carnival, films such as 'Bend it Like Beckham', and many distinctive ethnoscapes like Birmingham's 'Curry Mile', as well as older traditions, norms and **artefacts** (the physical results of culture), such as pubs. Globalisation and immigration are increasingly important processes involved in cultural dynamism, as shown by 'clone town high streets' and chains like McDonald's.

Spatial patterns and racial disharmony

The more negative side of such cultural diversity is racial disharmony and unrest. Ethnic minorities now constitute almost

8% of the UK's population, with distinct geographical patterns. Before 1945, most ethnic groups gravitated towards the capital, London, although there were also concentrations of Irish and other diaspora in other cities, particularly Liverpool. Since then, the spatial pattern of migration has been more widespread, with hotspots in the Midlands and northern cities like Bradford. The 2012 Channel 4 TV series 'Making Bradford British' highlighted concern with ethnicity in demographically heterogeneous areas .

Urban areas possess greater ethnic diversity, as migrants are drawn primarily to them by the range of social and economic opportunities. The phenomenon of urban racial unrest, which probably started in 1919 in Chicago, was not seen until 1958 in the UK, when the Notting Hill riots were identified as racially motivated, since the flashpoint involved an attack on a Jamaican. In 1979 violent unrest occurred in Southall, London, during a National Front rally.

The early 1980s saw a series of violent incidents largely involving Afro-Caribbean communities in St Pauls (Bristol), Toxteth (Liverpool), Tottenham, Brixton and Peckham (London), Chapeltown (Leeds) and Handsworth (Birmingham). Common factors to all were poor living conditions, unemployment and urban decay.

Government-commissioned inquiries, most famously the 1981 Scarman Report, warned that urgent action was needed to tackle racial disadvantage, and distrust in the police. Since then, police racism, itself a reflection of wider attitudes in British society, has been reduced. However, despite the UK's welfare state and huge regeneration projects nationally, many people are still considered deprived, with arguably greater inequalities in wealth, wages and life opportunities, than at any time since the 1920s.

Flashpoint: the UK riots of 2011

No government investigation was commissioned post-2011, but many research reports have been published, including the 2012 'Reading the Riots' report,

Figure 2: A timeline 'map' of the riots

<p>Thursday, 4 August 18:15 – Tottenham: the trigger. Black youth Mark Duggan shot dead by officers from the Metropolitan Police. His family were slow in being told and no senior member was involved, creating anger at such perceived 'disrespect'.</p>
<p>DAY ONE – Saturday, 6 August 17:00 – Tottenham: the spark. Family and friends of Mark Duggan marched from Broadwater Farm estate to Tottenham Police Station to demand information surrounding his death. Large numbers of police and police horses arrived to disperse the demonstrators. By 5.00 am, local high street shops including O2, Currys and PC World had been looted and disturbances spread across Tottenham, especially in low police presence areas. The Magistrates' Court and probation service office were set alight.</p>
<p>DAY TWO - Sunday, 7 August: initial spread. Copycat violence across London. Police increased officers on the streets from 3,000 to 4,300.</p>
<p>DAY THREE - Monday, 8 August: wider spread across larger cities in England, and police numbers increased to 6,000 in London.</p>
<p>DAY FOUR – Tuesday, 9 August: the rioting continues. New disturbances in London and assorted cities and towns in England. Police numbers increased to 16,000.</p>
<p>DAY FIVE – Wednesday, 10 August: the end. Three young Asians die in Birmingham in a hit-and-run incident whilst attempting to protect their neighbourhood from rioters. The last incident was a gang trying to smash into a convenience store in Birmingham's Ladywood district.</p>

Figure 3: A wall of shame – the complex causes of the riots

<p>Trigger factor: Mark Duggan's death, but perceived 'injustices' in policing highlighted by many rioters.</p>	<p>The rise of 'gangsta rap culture'. Instead of 'business as usual', gangs worked together, united in police opposition and looting opportunity.</p>	<p>Social media was a key to the spread: Facebook and Twitter, but especially the private network of BlackBerry Messenger.</p>
<p>Inhibitors and shifts in behaviour. There were four categories at the riots: watchers, rioters, looters and the non-involved. Youngsters in particular shifted from 'curious watchers' to 'opportunistic looters', especially when and where the key inhibitor of policing was low in profile.</p>	<p>Recent changes in government policy e.g. the end of the Future Jobs Fund, EMA and rise in university student fees have affected many young people, especially from deprived communities.</p>	<p>Social deprivation involving poverty seen as important, however, it was not just uneducated, low-skilled white lower-class ('chavs') rioting but also educated richer youths.</p>
<p>Media images of officers standing back as they were outnumbered and out-manoeuvred may have encouraged opportunist looters.</p>	<p>The London's Metropolitan Police were criticised as being too 'soft' and slow to respond.</p>	<p>Many of the rioters and looters were teenagers, but there was a wide age spread, including an arrested 11-year-old.</p>
<p>Lack of deterrent to commit crimes, because of relatively short prison sentences.</p>	<p>Boris Johnson, London's Mayor blamed poor education standards.</p>	<p>There is mixed evidence on race or ethnicity as a factor. Far-right groups such as the BNP sought to exploit the tensions.</p>
<p>Lack of family guidance, specifically father role models, and lack of social responsibility.</p>	<p>Over-dependence on the welfare state.</p>	<p>An excessive consumerist society and general moral decay – has England become a sick society?</p>

(a collaboration between the London School of Economics, the Guardian newspaper, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation). The report was based on 270 interviews with those

involved, interviews with residents, police and the judiciary, and information from over 2.5 million riot-related Twitter messages.

So was race responsible? The 2011 riots had some common features – looting, arson, attacks on the police. Yet unlike those previously seen in the UK or elsewhere e.g. in France, Los Angeles or Detroit, they ranged in place and race, age and sex of those involved. Those prosecuted have included a high proportion of middle class youngsters, including, for instance, ballet dancers, law students, graduates and the grammar school daughter of a millionaire!

Criminologists and sociologists suggest a variety of causes (Figure 3). Not all ethnically diverse urban regions experienced unrest, suggesting that the processes of assimilation are more advanced in some areas, or that the riots had a more complex causation. Overall, 46% of those prosecuted for riot-related offences were black, which is far higher than the national average. However, when compared to the local demography, a different story emerges. In the London borough of Haringey, which includes Tottenham, 55% of defendants were black, compared to a 17% black population. But in Salford 94% of rioters were white, compared to an 88% white population, and 6% of rioters were black, compared to a 2% black population.

Explanations for the end of looting and violence on the fifth night are as complex as those for its diffusion. The catalyst may have been the emotive televised response of a father of hit and run victims in the West Midlands. Meanwhile, the police threatened a heavier response, with rumours of the use of rubber bullets, potential curfews and even deployment of the army. The rainy weather conditions may also have helped.

Case study of Tottenham: epicentre of the riots

Tottenham, in the densely populated north London borough of Haringey, was the original focus (Figure 2), one of the few places in the UK which has experienced two riots in a generation. The previous one in 1985, was based at the Broadwater Farm estate, and took place when the area was dominated by just by four communities: Caribbean, Irish, Cypriot and white cockney. Race was core to those disturbances, but today the N17 postcode is one of

Figure 4: The ethnic dimension of the built environment



Source: Kim Adams

the most diverse in the UK, if not in Europe, and 220 languages are spoken there. According to David Lammy, Tottenham's black MP, the 2011 riots were more about poverty and inequality, and the majority of the rioters were young, male and unemployed.

Haringey, whose population is over 225,000, remains one of London's poorest boroughs, with over 10,000 people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance, and 43 jobseekers chasing every job vacancy. 80% of children live in poverty and 65% of black children are in single parent families. Caribbean boys are more likely to be excluded permanently from school, and blacks in this borough are three times more likely to be unemployed than white people, and are more likely to end up in prison than at a Russell Group university. Black people are seven times more likely to be subjected to stop and search than white people, and the policing and the mistrust between police and the community seemed critical. The Metropolitan

Police have been criticised, in the aftermath of the riots, for not reflecting the racial diversity of London: 32,000 officers, only 868 are black.

Case study of Southampton – multiculturalism and integration in action?

Hundreds of Twitter messages followed the initial riots in London about rumours of disorder in Southampton, with the police on standby, but no disorder resulted, whereas minor disturbances had followed the Brixton riots in 1981. Although Southampton is not widely perceived as having a diverse ethnic demography, it parallels the UK in most ethnic groups. Why was it not subject to incidents of violence or extreme antisocial behaviour in 2011? A brief examination of two communities within Southampton's ethnic mix may suggest factors that lead to success in a multicultural society. The factors that are important for disorder may lie elsewhere.

Poles – immigration of Poles began after 1950, and accelerated post-2004, and now about 25,000 of the total population of 236,700 (2010 data from ONS) is Polish, one of the biggest concentrations in the UK after London. Their **integration**, if not assimilation, into the local community has been hastened by their respect for the law, strong work ethic, ability and desire to speak English. Their youthful profile has ‘breathed new life’ into the city, for instance the Catholic churches. Their influence is especially obvious in the **retail ethnoscape**, as shown in Figure 4.

Asians – the second biggest immigrant group in Southampton, but much more longstanding, is of Indian origin, mainly Sikh or Hindu. This demographic has radically changed since the 2001 Census, with an influx of Somalis, Afghans, Kurds and Iranians. As with the Polish community, Asians are well integrated in Southampton, with radio stations such as AwaazFM diffusing the music and culture of Asia. There is an annual Mela festival hosted by the city. Diverse religious beliefs are catered for in temples, mosques and even synagogues, and indeed Southampton has been called the multicultural capital of the south.

Both of these cultural groups – Asians and Poles – have benefited from a wide employment base in this port city, plenty of low-cost accommodation and a city council with very pro-cultural diversity policies, although pockets of deprivation do exist.

Conclusion

It would be easy to blame the riots of 2011 on longer-term root causes of poverty, injustice and a deep-seated hatred of the police sparked by the direct catalyst of the shooting of a black youth. There is a link between civil unrest and austerity, with subgroups of people feeling left out of ‘consumer culture’, and technology certainly played a role in the speed and spread of the riots. Digital communications have tipped the balance of power away from the authorities towards the streets, just as they did in the ‘Arab Spring’ (in the UK the effect has been less violent!). Many of those involved in the riots took a one-off chance to ignore the rules, smash, grab, and

‘get one over’ on the police, hooded and without leaders or indeed a real ‘cause’. Ironically it could be said that the riots of 2011 were effectively ‘a triumph of multiculturalism’, because of the wide groups of people involved. However, multiculturalism is not just about racial groups.

How societies deal with diversity is important, since it can affect the safety, wellbeing and happiness of a country and its productivity. The multicultural approach attempts to create unity through difference, holding that although a nation’s subcultures are diverse, those subcultures share common values. Multiculturalism basically implies the belief that no one culture is perfect or represents the best life, and that all can benefit from working with other cultures. That is certainly the case in Southampton. The University of Southampton researched the impact of ethnic diversity upon levels of mutual trust within communities. In 2010 it reported that poverty and gross inequality are six times more likely than ethnic diversity to cause British people to be suspicious of their neighbours.

A complex, and toxic, cocktail of social, economic and physical factors lay behind the riots of 2011. The independent Riots Communities and Victims Panel conclusion was that riots of this nature will happen again, and recommended, in particular, changes in tackling

youth unemployment and better relationships between communities and the police. Underpinning all of this is the UK’s persistent massive economic and social inequality, which presents real challenges for our communities and political leaders if we are to be able to fix what David Cameron PM calls our ‘broken society’.

References

- Wikipedia’s debating section:
http://debatepedia.idebate.org/en/index.php/Debate:_Multiculturalism_vs._assimilation
- Life in the UK Test - official website and Guardian’s sample of questions:
<http://lifeintheuktest.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk>
- The London School of Economics, BBC, Channel 4 and the Guardian are rich sources for articles and videos. For example:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots?INTCMP=SRCH>

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. Classify the complex factors which created the 2011 riots, using Figure 3 by colour-coding the following:
 - root (background, underlying) and direct causes of the riots
 - short-term and longer-term factors
 - physical/technological, social and economic reasons. You could use a venn diagram to help, or a simple table.
2. Investigate the differences in deprivation between Haringey and Southampton. Use the Department for Communities and Local Government, and the Guardian’s interactive map – here is the link: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/mar/29/indices-multiple-deprivation-poverty-england>.
3. Further research:
 - Identify the different individuals or groups of people involved in multiculturalism and assimilation .
 - Contrast the characteristics and causes of the riots in France’s suburbs (or banlieus) in 2005 with those in the UK in 2011.
 - How does the recent Conservative government’s ‘Big Society’ policy link into multiculturalism?