The history of riots in London shows that persistent inequality and injustice is always likely to breed periodic violent uprisings.

The August 2011 riots in London prompted many commentators to look back on previous riots in the city and the country to see what common threads, if any, run through outbreaks of public disorder. **Jerry White** *examines the Gordon Riots, the Hyde Park riots of 1855 and the Brixton riots of 1981 and finds that perceived inequalities and injustice in London have and will continue to breed periodic violent uprisings.*

Riot and London. At first sight the words sit uneasily together, for traditionally London is a city known best for its order, civility and tolerance. Yet in a long history there is space for more than one tradition, and from time to time, every generation or so, rioting in London has challenged the forces of order and stretched them past breaking point. At times London has seemed on the brink of civil war.

The history of London's riots reveals great differences between them. What possible similarity can there be between the August riots of 2011 and, say, the uproar attending the election campaigns and imprisonment of John Wilkes in 1768? It seems not much, though both had some features in common (an element of organisation, for instance, and reckless violence against those seeking to quell the disturbances). But perhaps reflecting further on some of these troubled events, while giving just weight to the very specific triggers that led to rioting in the first place, can begin to unpick those structural features of London life that have caused its tradition of riot to endure over time, and make it likely to continue to do so.

I've chosen three events, one from each of the pervious centuries, to explore change and continuity in London's tradition of riot. The first, by far the most serious, was the Gordon Riots of June 1780, which has been compared to the August 2011 disturbances by some commentators. The second was the rioting in Hyde Park in June 1855, and the third was the Brixton Disorders of 8-10 April 1981.

The Gordon Riots of June 1780 really were a moment when London seemed plunged into civil war. They began out of many causes: economic, political and religious. Economically, wages had been overtaken by the cost of living for much of the 1770s, and the living standards of the poor were chronically depressed.

Politically, the country was in the final throes of an unpopular and humiliating war with America, where defeat followed defeat. At home, the stock of a hated government was miserably low, with anti-government rioting breaking out in Downing Street and Whitehall at the beginning of 1779. Then, into an already flammable mix, was thrown the firebrand of religious intolerance. An Act to remove some disabilities from Roman Catholics in England had passed into law as a government measure in 1778. It had attracted no public hostility at the time. But in 1779 an attempt to extend its provisions to Scotland produced fierce anti-Catholic rioting in Glasgow and Edinburgh. And in London a Protestant association was formed to begin a movement for the

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repeal of the Act in England. Its president was Lord George Gordon, a 29- year old former naval lieutenant and MP for a Wiltshire constituency, the third son of a Duke, and mad – at least, unhinged in matters of religion.

When Gordon led marches presenting a petition to parliament in favour of repealing the Catholic Relief Act

he prompted a week of rioting in London. What set out as the destruction of Catholic chapels and the firing and looting of prominent Catholics' houses and businesses turned in a few days to an all-out attack on the London system of justice. This included attacks on the police offices at Bow Street and elsewhere; the 'spunging-houses' run by bailiffs to lock up debtors; and most of all on the prisons, the most loathed manifestations of power in London. Some 210 rioters were shot dead in the streets; another seventy-five or so died in the hospitals; unknown others dropped dead from drinking neat liquor looted from the distilleries or died at home from their wounds. It is said that the riots destroyed *ten times* more property than was destroyed in Paris during the entire French Revolution.

The events of 1855 seem pale in comparison, although it had also been a troubled year. The economic dislocations of war and a steep rise in the price of provisions precipitated 'bread riots' in the East End of London in February 1855, where it was said that 'mobs of boys and degraded women, under the guidance of stalwart ruffians or desperate Irishmen, paraded the streets and levied contributions.' Some organisation led to disturbances in several places simultaneously. Bakers' and chandlers' shops were plundered of bread and coal.

The summer saw more serious stuff. In June 1855 a Sunday Trading Bill introduced by Lord Robert Grosvenor was debated in parliament. Its object was to close shops and beerhouses and to shut down public transport all in the name of Sabbath observance. In the week before Sunday 24 June, printed bills from 'A ratepayer of Walworth' called 'artizans, mechanics, and lower orders of the metropolis' to Hyde Park 'to see how religiously the aristocracy observe the Sabbath'. Along the carriage drives between the Serpentine and Kensington Gardens crowds assembled to hoot and hiss the phaetons of the rich and their Sabbath-breaking servants. There were cries of 'Go to Church!' and horses were made to shy and bolt. For the next two Sundays, handbills and posters drew more protestors to the Park. On Sunday 1 July vast numbers, some said 150,000, turned up. Sticks, stones, clods of earth and horse dung were thrown and a noisy crowd clung deep along the rails of the carriageways.

It was not just the rich who were abused – '"Down with the Crushers!"' was one cry reported in *The Times*, and there were running skirmishes between police and people. Bystanders, promenaders, peaceful demonstrators and ruffians were all swept indiscriminately into the melee. For a time some young guardsmen joined the tumult against 'the crushers' and when eventually they were marched off the crowd followed, stoning their escort and then their barracks until dispersed by a police charge. There was much violence on both sides. Forty-nine policemen were injured. Among the crowd were a number of well-dressed pickpockets and 'other reckless and disorderly persons, bent on plunder and mischief'. The Sunday following there were further disturbances, including window-breaking in the West End and looting in shopping streets. Next day Lord Robert Grosvenor withdrew his Bill and the trouble slowly subsided.

The 'crushers', now going under different names, figured largely in the Brixton Disorders of 1981. That, too, was another troubled year. In January the dreadful 'Deptford Fire' at a party attended by young black people killed thirteen. The cause was almost certainly arson though no one was charged with the crime. Many thought it was a racist act, made worse by what seemed an inadequate investigation by the Metropolitan Police. A 'Black People's Day of Action' in March led to some fighting between marchers and bystanders in central London. That April the Special Patrol Group of the Met undertook – not for the first time – an operation against street crime in Lambeth. It was codenamed Swamp 81.

The Brixton Disorders were the most sustained and serious riots of the century in London. They were sparked by a PC attending a young black man who had been stabbed, but whom passers-by assumed had been beaten by the police. Within half an hour a riot had broken out with the police as its target. Over the next day and night, 279 police and 45 members of the public were injured and 145 buildings damaged, 28 by fire. There was extensive looting. One in three of those arrested was white. That summer there were further anti-police riots in Lambeth, Southall, Wood Green, Dalston and in more than twenty other places in the capital.

What can these events, 200 years apart, tell us about the underpinning to London's tradition of riot? Without ignoring the differences – which are great – I think they tell us something about the very nature of the place. For London is and always has been an unfairly-structured city. It promises the world to its citizens and flaunts daily what the richest among them can expect, what in reality few can obtain, and what many are excluded from altogether. The structures are maintained by a system of justice that tends to favour those who have over those who have not. From time to time this unfairness, and that system, become repugnant, occasionally intolerable. And when that happens some Londoners will erupt in fury. Their first targets are those elements in the justice system which they believe to be in the front line of protecting the very inequalities they resent so grievously. However we interpret the events of August 2011, they surely tell us that this age-old strand in London life is likely to maintain its vigour for the foreseeable future.

Professor Jerry White will be speaking on 1 November at the Westminster Society's event, 'A Turbulent City – Disorder & Riot in London since the Eighteenth Century'. *[More details](#).*