



Social Protest in 2011: Material and Cultural Aspects of Economic Inequalities

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Abstract

The wave of social protest that swept across England in August 2011 has predominantly been explained by political elites through appeals to various approaches that have in common individualistic frameworks of reference. Issues related to the material condition of society are either little analysed or, among the political elite, ruled out as an explanation of the protests. However, it is clear from both the historical literature on social protest and the contemporary literature on relationships between crime and inequality that explanations ignoring inequalities, particularly economic inequalities, are problematic.

Keywords: *Austerity; Crisis; Culture; Exclusion; Inclusion; Injustice; Social Protest*

Introduction

1.1 It is usual for political elites to explain the antecedents of social protest, such as that which swept across English cities and towns in August 2011, in the attitude, character and/or culture of individuals and families and/or the neighbourhoods in which they live. The reaction to the latest instances of social protest are a testament to this. The Prime Minister David Cameron, for instance, has argued:

These riots were not about government cuts: they were directed at high street stores, not parliament. And these riots were not about poverty: that insults the millions of people who, whatever the hardship would never dream of making others suffer like this. No this was about behaviour...people showing indifference to right and wrong...people with a twisted moral code...people with a complete absence of self-restraint
(<<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots/>>).

1.2 Even more pithily, Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke has argued that the 'hardcore of rioters came from a feral underclass, cut off from the mainstream in everything but its materialism' (*The Guardian*, 6 September 2011). Here, Clarke was drawing upon an individualised version of citizenship associated with the New Right and framed by the contradictory positions of support for freedom drawn from libertarian liberalism and for responsibility drawn from social conservatism (Dwyer, 2004).

1.3 This brief paper rejects such arguments and suggests that social protest cannot be adequately explained unless the material context – issues related to poverty and inequality – is considered, for it is no coincidence that social protest tends to emerge at periods of acute economic hardship and to a large extent involves people who are from the income poorest groups. This has been the case across history; from the 'food riots' of the 18th century to protests about the operation of the poor law and the spread of livelihood destroying mechanisation in the 19th century, to food riots in 1916/17 and protests against the way public and unemployment assistance was operated between the first and second world wars (Coles, 1978, Thompson, 1971, Miller, 1979, Hannington, 1936), to the protests of 1981 that were framed by a conjunction of injustices related to policing, racial disadvantage and discrimination, and an economic environment denoted by rising mass unemployment, particularly among young people (Scarman, 1981, Unsworth, 1982). In contrast to involving feckless and irresponsible people, social protest is the consequence of the operation of socially and culturally embedded economic processes. We focus upon these in the following section.

Economic crisis, austerity and social protest

2.1 England is currently experiencing a lengthy period of acute economic problems. It is facing an economic crisis, the likes of which has not been seen since the 1930s; an austerity package of public spending cuts, the brutality of which has only been seen once (in the 1970s and in response to the International Monetary fund's loan to the British government) since the 1930s (Jones *et al.*, 2011); and a protracted squeeze on incomes that has not been seen since at least World War II and probably before (Joyce and Sibieta, 2011, King, 2011). All this is in addition to decades of 'reform' that means the social security safety net has become thinner. Social welfare benefits are more difficult to claim because of their increasingly 'targeted' nature and are more easy to lose because they are hedged by so many conditions related to the attitude of claimants to paid work and, increasingly, their more general behaviour (Grover, 2008). The mantra of 1997-2010 Labour government, 'no rights without responsibilities', has become 'few rights with lots of responsibilities', something that is being exacerbated by the actions of the Conservative led Coalition government (CLCG) in their adoption of 'personalised conditionality' and the myriad of changes it has announced to the detail of social security benefits (Chancellor of the Exchequer, 2010a, 2010b).

2.2 In a material sense all these trends affect those on the lowest incomes the greatest. While, for example, the CLCG has framed its austerity package of public spending cuts in a discourse of 'fairness' (Chancellor of the Exchequer, 2010a, 2010b) and, in appeals to a classless stoicism in discursive sound bites, such as we are 'all in this together' (Osborne, 2010), it is income poor people and the poorest communities in which they live that will be the most heavily affected by the retrenchment of spending cuts (Browne and Levell, 2010, Joyce and Sibieta, 2011, SIGOMA, 2011).

How though, can we understand the linkages between the poor and deteriorating economic circumstances of marginalised people and social protest?

Historical explanations of social protest: the importance of absolute deprivation

2.3 While there are always problems in making comparisons over time, the historical literature on social protest points to the fact that such protests, rather than being 'mindless' or 'purely criminal', are framed by socially-informed perceptions of justice. For instance, in the 18th century 'food riots' were framed by concerns with prices that 'operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc' (Thompson, 1971, p. 79). Of course, contemporary society is very different to that of the 18th century, but the substance of Thompson's argument – that social protest is a framed by considerations of economic and social justice - holds as much today as it did in the 18th century^[1].

2.4 The literature on 'food riots' places explanations of social protest within perceptions of the operation of markets within the context of absolute need; the need for sustenance at socially acceptable prices. In contemporary society explanations of crime and deviancy, and by extension social protest, within a material basis of absolute deprivation are argued (and perhaps too prematurely) to be irrelevant (Grover, 2008). However, the general thrust – what Coles (1978, pp. 158-59) refers to as 'consumer protection' – of such protests is still relevant, but in the context of concerns with relative deprivation. As a tool for understanding crime and deviancy relative deprivation is still thought to hold validity (Young, 1999, 2002, 2007).

Relative Deprivation: 'exclusion' and 'inclusion'

2.5 We have seen that the Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, argues that the protests in August 2011 were the consequence of a 'a feral underclass, cut off from the mainstream in everything but it materialism'. There can be little doubt of the populism of Clarke's comments. Unintentionally though, he points to a fruitful means of understanding the recent protests by locating them in the disjuncture between, on the one hand, 'exclusion' (what Clarke refers to as an 'underclass', a means, given its 'feral' prefix, of othering a group of income poor people held to be identifiable by a lack of control and moral reasoning) and 'inclusion' (in this instance an understanding of materialism). The individualism and moralism of Clarke's reference to a 'feral underclass' are deplorable. However, the notion that economically marginalised people can contemporaneously be 'excluded' and 'included' is important to understanding social protest in late modern society if we are to focus upon material issues related to inequalities.

2.6 We can see this in approaches to explaining crime and deviance to which the idea of relative deprivation is crucial (Young, 1999, 2002, 2007). Young is scathing in his critique of approaches, most visible under 1997-2010 Labour governments in Britain, that he argues created a false binary between the so-called 'excluded' and 'included'. In contrast, he argues that late modern society can be understood as a 'bulimic society', one that 'consumes and culturally assimilates masses of people through education, the media and participation in the market place' (Young, 1999, p. 82), but 'systematically in the job market, on the streets in day-to-day contacts with the outside world practices exclusion' (Young, 2002, p. 469). In other words, a society where although people know what it is to be culturally included – what, for instance, in Bauman's (2004) terms needs to be consumed to denote success – but one in which they are excluded by economic and social structures that mean many do not have access to the resources (for instance, well paid and secure forms of employment) that would allow them to be successfully 'included'. It is at this disjuncture between 'exclusion' and 'inclusion' Young argues explains crime and deviance in late modern society.

2.7 In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that widespread social protest has recently been witnessed

in England, because while the cultural emphasis upon consumption as the means of denoting and measuring success continues unabated, the opportunities for successfully engaging with such cultural practices have, owing to the economic trends outlined above, become more difficult in recent years. There should be little surprise that in the social protests of August 2011 the targets were retail outlets and much of the energies of participants was put into looting. They are the material and symbolic embodiment of consumerism.

2.8 It is not just the material aspects of the current economic environment that are important in understanding the recent protests in England. Its discursive construction is also important. Despite the fact that the current economic crisis was born of the practices of capitalism, it is economically marginalised people, particularly, those reliant on social security benefits, that have been the target of political and public opprobrium. They are seen as the economic, moral and social problem for society. This is not unfamiliar. 'Scroungerphobia'-type discourses have important roles during periods of economic turmoil. In the second half of the 1970s, for instance, Golding and Middleton (1982, p. 109) argued, they contributed to the dismantling of the post-WWII welfare consensus leading to an 'insistent opposition to the welfare system based on the twin themes that it was both unnecessary and an excessively costly burden'. Such discourses, however, also help to other economically marginalised people as burdensome, 'undeserving' and 'unworthy'. This is important because crime and deviance are not only driven by material issues related to economic inequality, but also by an attendant emotionality; by feelings, for example, of anger, hurt and humiliation, and the need for excitement (c.f. Presdee, 2000; Hayward, 2002, Young, 2007).

2.9 According to Young (2007, p. 54), 'transgressors are driven by the energies of humiliation - the utilitarian core is often there, but around it is constructed a frequent delight in excess, a glee in breaking the rules'. Hayward (2002, p. 86) points to the fact that licit avenues to 'risk, hedonism and excitement' are contingent upon class, gender and neighbourhood and, because of this, 'if one is not able to escape one's social environment to engage in licit risk taking or edgework activities, one has to find alternative outlets to play out these emotions'. For people who are marginalised in contemporary society this takes on particular significance as:

the run-down estate or ghetto becomes the paradoxical space; on the one hand it symbolizes the systematic powerlessness so often felt by the individuals who live in such environments, and on the other the sink estate serves as a site of consumption that provides numerous illegal activities. The ghetto becomes a 'performance zone' in which displays of risk, excitement, masculinity and even 'carnavalesque pleasure' in the form of rioting are frequently perpetuated (*ibid.*).

2.10 Similar observations were made about the recent protests. So, for example, Bulldog, a 'Brixton gang' member, is quoted as saying: 'But you don't get to do this everyday... It's wild and exciting. You can do it and don't get arrested' (*The Sunday Times*, 14 August 2011), while Tottenham Youth Worker, Clasford Stirling is reported as saying: 'It was exciting for some of these kids what happened. It turned into a giant playground.' (*The Observer*, 14 August 2011). Such comments are an indictment of the material and symbolic aspects of the current economic and social environment in England, rather than an indictment of the people involved in the protests. They also help to demonstrate that the othering of marginalised people as being *the* economic problem is double-edged. It may appeal to the 'respectable', but it also contributes to an emotionality of marginalisation and gross inequality in which income poor people are derided, humiliated and stigmatised as being a surplus population, a residuum. Rather than having the desired effect of shaming such people into conformity – for example, attempting to buttress the work ethic (Golding and Middleton, 1982) – the framing of economic problems as being the consequence of public spending on the 'benefit culture' may, ironically, have contributed to the antecedents of the recent protests.

Conclusion

3.1 There is no coincidence that the recent protests witnessed across England came when many people, but especially the most marginalised, are facing particularly hard economic times. Social protest erupts at particular moments when there is a feeling that injustices are occurring. While these do not have to be economic in nature, they often are. To ignore the economic basis of social protest is to further politically simplistic explanations that mean difficult issues can be ignored. These include the discursive and practical treatment of workless and income poor people, and the ability of capitalism and its political classes to deliver economic stability and livelihoods to individuals and families at levels that mean the poorest people are not excluded from fully engaging in those activities that denote 'inclusion' in late modern society. Unfortunately, all the signs are that the policy reactions to the social protests of August 2011 are in the opposite direction. There is to be no change in the CLCG's austerity measures and, as a consequence of the protests, it has set in motion an additional review of social welfare measures. The consequence of which is likely to be the further impoverishment of already marginalised people through increased restrictions on benefits and services (for example, the possibility of evicting people from social housing involved in the protest and the withdrawal of their social security benefits). There is policy and political short-sightedness in considering such developments, for they are reflective of recent trends in social security policy that have been described as being 'vindictive' because of their punitive and immiserating nature (Grover, 2010). In the context of the economic crisis England faces and a public policy that is denoted by austerity and retrenchment, such developments will merely contribute to a range of injustices, to which economic injustice is central, that helped framed the social protests in English cities and towns in August 2011.

Notes

¹ The focus of this paper is primarily upon economic justice, but it is equally arguable that there are social injustices, most notably in late modern society related to racial discrimination and the policing of poorer and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, that also frame social protest. The immediate catalyst of the recent protests, for instance, was the fatal shooting by police of a young Black man, while those in 2001 in East Lancashire and West Yorkshire towns were framed, at least in part, by concerns with racism. It is widely agreed that the operation of the 'sus' laws, particularly in the Metropolitan Police's 'Swamp 81' operation, played an important role in protest in Brixton in 1981 (see Clarke, 2001, Ouseley, 2001, Ritchie, 2001, Scarman, 1981).

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