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POLITICS, CONSUMPTION OR NIHILISM: PROTEST AND DISORDER AFTER THE GLOBAL CRASH

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The years since the onset of global recession, circa 2008, have led to an unprecedented rise in discontent in societies around the world. Whether this be the Arab Spring of 2011 when popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes cascaded across North Africa and the Middle East, or the rise of left-wing, anti-capitalist and far-right movements in the developed 'north', ranging from the Indignados in Spain, Syriza and the Golden Dawn in Greece, Le Front National in France, student movements in Quebec, or the allegedly less articulate explosion of rage characterising the English Riots of 2011, it is clear that Fukuyama's thesis regarding the final ascendancy of liberal capitalism (and its puppet regimes in the developing world) was grossly misplaced. In Badiou's (2012) terms we are witnessing 'the rebirth of history', where all bets regarding the trajectories of local and global political economies are off.

The papers collected together for two special issues of 'Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest' probe the divergent expressions and understandings of social protest and disorder in this age of global austerity, retrenchment and revolt. The impetus for these special issues was the international conference held at Sheffield Hallam University on the 13th and 14th of September 2012, 13 months after the widespread outbreak of rioting across London and a number of other English provincial cities. The purpose of that conference was envisaged by its organisers (Bob Jeffery, Joseph Ibrahim and David Waddington) as one of questioning dominant discourses around the meanings of disorder and protest, primarily in relation to the English Riots, but also as regards our understanding of the formation of social discontent and social movements elsewhere. While the dominant framing of the English Riots by the mass media, politicians and a number of academics (Moxon, 2012; Durodie, 2012; Hall, 2012; Treadwell et al, 2013) sought to depoliticise the events of August 2011, through interpretations that reduced the disorder to 'pure criminality' (Hope, 2012), nihilism or a perverse desire on the part of the rioters to participate within the dominant neoliberal consumer culture (rather than to challenge it), we felt there were indications that there was far more to the story than this (see Jeffery and Jackson, 2012 and Waddington, 2012 for early attempts by two of the organisers to interpret the meaning of the riots).

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Yet, sensitive to the need to place events in the United Kingdom within the context of the wider crises of global capitalism, and the rise of resistance movements around the world, we also sought participants who would be able to provide critical insights into the examples of social contention elsewhere in Europe and beyond. We were also interested in the changing dynamics of social protest which have altered the forms that the articulation of discontent have assumed with the onset of the Twenty-first Century, the impact of new technologies in terms of mobilising disparate political currents, the changing nature public order policing, and the ways in which this is contested by diverse publics. The conference was envisaged as an explicitly multidisciplinary endeavour from the outset, with contributions from social movement scholars, sociologists, criminologists, media theorists, international relations researchers and others.

Finally, in terms of the motivations for public protest and disorder, the papers presented at the 2012 conference explored both rupture and continuities. On the one hand, long recognised sources of social antagonism were very much to the fore, be this the extent and widening of socio-economic inequalities, persistent ethnocentrism and xenophobias, distant and inaccessible political structures. On the other hand, the nature of social conflicts are changing in various ways, with contestations over access to urban public space, the rise of new social identities, the fall-out from various forms of global economic and political integration, featuring to a greater extent than in previous episodes of societal discontent.

The first of these special issues is dedicated to the English riots, whereas the second will explore international case studies and social movements more generally. The first paper, by Tony Jefferson attempts a review of what we know, or what we think we know of the English Riots, exploring the issues which are familiar from the recent history of British urban riots, and those which may represent new phenomena. His account is structured around an engagement with the 'moral panic' concept that featured so centrally in his earlier work on the 'mugging phenomenon' (Hall et al, 2013). Not only does Jefferson provide one of the clearest chronologies of how the English 2011 riots unfolded, his detailed account is suitably sensitive to the 'diversity of action' (Bagguley & Hussain, 2008) that characterised the multiple sites of disorder across the country.

In the second paper, Christian Garland, writing in a Critical Theory tradition, turns to the media coverage of the riots, and their role in 'simulating events as they happen'. Exploring a very wide array of media 'artefacts' produced during and after the riots, Garland questions the impartiality of the representations of these events by the popular media, critiquing the reductionist construction of 'good guys' and 'bad guys', and the promotion of a repressive state response. Adopting a polemical and combative style, this article seeks to recuperate some of the street-level perspectives of the riots by ordinary participants and spectators. Along the way, Garland challenges the myths and mystifications of the media, and the ways in which these serve to perpetuate fear and then harness that fear to win legitimacy for the prevailing order, all the while dissimulating the deteriorating social conditions that Garland sees as central to any explanation of the riots

Where the first two papers take the events in London as focal points, Bob Jeffery and Waqas Tufail explore one particular riot in the 'provinces' - that which occurred in Pendleton, Salford on Tuesday the 9th of August. This is an important corrective to the dearth of research that exists on the significant events that took place outside of the capital (but see King, 2012; Phillips et al, 2012; McKenzie, 2013 for notable exceptions that have been written with regard to the Birmingham, Liverpool and Nottingham riots respectively). Jeffery and Tufail argue that processes of state-led gentrification and accompanying repressive policing were instrumental to the outburst of anger in Salford, as well as the impossibility of the marginalised working classes making their voices heard through any other means. Taking the reader through a step by step

account of how events unfolded in Salford (with some discussion of events in neighbouring Manchester), the two authors interrogate dominant discourses on the causes and meanings of the 2011 riots, strongly contesting the account of Treadwell et al (2013) that the riots were merely 'shopping with violence'.

From the local to the internationally comparative, the fourth article in this collection by Matthew Moran and David Waddington draws attention to similarities between the August 2011 English Riots and the Paris Riots of 2005. The article is structured around an engagement with Waddington's 'Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder' (Waddington et al, 1989; Waddington, 2007) and draws on empirical findings from Moran's (2012) research on Paris. Exploring the social contexts of the English and French urban riots, Moran and Waddington point to police-community relations strained through 'stop-and-search' (controles d'identites) tactics, but go beyond most commentators in exploring the ways in which the 'communicative' responses of the state served to accentuate the rage of the urban marginalised. More than this, the authors explore the impact of social media on the disorders in terms of the construction of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2013): a far more nuanced approach than the popular technologically determinist accounts that are couched in terms of 'contagion'.

In the final paper of this special issue, which also provides a conceptual bridge to the next, related issue of this journal, Dan Briggs both critically investigates the varying interpretations of and responses to the English Riots, and relates these to the systemic crises of global capitalism and the increasing manifestations of opposition and resistance to it. Briggs draws on wide-ranging writings on the English Riots of 2011 (Briggs, 2012a; Briggs, 2012b; Treadwell et al, 2013), but ultimately offers some very personal reflections of their meaning in relation to the wider upsurge in global protest ('a sign perhaps that the orgy of global capitalism is reaching its climax'). Writing in a style the author describes as something between 'academic, journalistic and realist', Briggs draws attention to the scale and significance of 'looting' during the riots as emblematic of a society enthral to consumption. Briggs makes use of 'productive metaphors' (Urry, 2000) that seek to probelamatise this society of conspicuous consumption while also pointing to the wider crisis of global capitalism premised on continual growth.

Running throughout these five articles are a number of common threads: firstly, a focus on the way in which disorder is initiated and the grievances that lead some people to take to the streets. Secondly, all five pieces speak to a sense of political disenfranchisement in England today, whether this be through economic and racial marginalisation, or through a state of consumer passivity, buttressed by hegemonic discourses delineating value and its obverse. Thirdly, though in very different ways, the articles call for attention to detail, to locality and context, to the voices of participants and the gap between these accounts and dominant representations. For Moran and Waddington this means taking account of the 'imagined communities' of marginalised youth, for Jeffery and Tufail this means speaking to residents in the neighbourhoods where rioting occurred, while for Briggs this means hearing the desire for acquisition when it is articulated as such.

In the second special issue stemming from the 'Politics, Consumption or Nihilism' conference we shall be exploring contemporary articulations of protest and the policing of protest more generally. This will include papers on the policing of 'anti-fracking' demonstrations, the Occupy movement and protestors engagement with new technologies in the UK, the Quebecois student movement of 2012 and the mobilisation of the Golden Dawn in Greece. These articles promise to critically engage with the ways in which social order continues to be renegotiated by the upsurge in protest following the global crash of 2007/2008.

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