

# Britain's Civil Unrest: Criminal Elements or Victims of Circumstances?



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## Introduction

In this article I shall try to account for reasons behind the riots in London in August 2011. Parts of my attempt to explain what is perhaps inexplicable will be to draw up a framework of historical and contemporary British characteristics with a view to arguing that these occurrences were not as surprising as people seemed to believe. Unrest and a 'tit for tat' vendetta mentality had, for a long time, been part of many inner city areas and the police had defined many of the neighbourhoods we saw affected by the uprisings as 'no go' areas. However, in August 2011 several English inner city areas were marred by civil unrest which swiftly escalated to such an extent that the disturbances spread, through the use of social media, to other cities.

The pace at which the tumult spread and the intensity of the riots left many people, both in Britain and elsewhere, aghast. British media were hesitant in analysing events and offering possible explanations for why such developments could occur. The media seemed to confine their role to describing what they witnessed and reporting from the many scenes as events unfolded. Most commentators were surprised that the killing of Mark Duggan on 4 August and the subsequent peaceful demonstration from Broadwater Farm Estate to Tottenham Police Station in North London could result in such overwhelming violence, destruction and social havoc. In those August days the questions were many, but the answers were few. How could the killing of one man, although bad enough in itself, lead to people going on a rampage of looting, stealing and destruction in their own communities? Responses to the killing

by the police were completely out of proportion to the scope of the killing itself. So what were the underlying causes of the unrest?

## Social unrest

Social and civil unrest has a long history in the UK. It is not as if this was the first time urban centres experienced such lawlessness, and in most cases there was an episode that triggered off a series of events leading to what we saw last August. Without doubt, the episode this time was the killing of Mark Duggan. Peter Ackroyd, the greatest living chronicler of London, said to *The Independent* newspaper that 'rioting has always been a London tradition. It has been there since the early Middle Ages ... They happen so frequently that they are almost part of London's texture' (interview in *The Independent* with Peter Ackroyd 22 August 2011). This argument can easily be applied to other cities, too: as long as the cities themselves endure, this kind of activity will also endure. In other words, such events will continue to take place in the future, as they occur in areas where different social groups live close together.

When these occurrences took place in August the House of Commons had adjourned for the summer recess. It had been a busy summer for the country's elected representatives since they had been kept longer in their offices than usual due to the circumstances surrounding Rupert Murdoch and the scandals involving the paper *News of the World*. However, when unrest set fire to London, Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron, Home Secretary Theresa May, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and London's Mayor Boris Johnson all returned from their holidays. An

emergency like this demanded that Parliament be recalled, and so it was on 11 August in order to debate the situation and attempt to put an end to the events. But many people were struck by Cameron's harsh language when he referred to demonstrators as thugs and criminals that would be treated roughly in the courts. Perhaps this was fair enough, and with hindsight it is easier to view Cameron's statements as political rhetoric and alarmist propaganda aimed at clearing the streets and making it crystal clear that people involved in criminal activity had to take full legal responsibility for their actions. It is hard to judge, even ten months later, whether Cameron's confrontational language fuelled the situation or calmed it down. What seems clear though, is that an increased police presence in the blazing cities of England eventually restored a sense of order.

When the fires in the inner city areas had been put out, the public demanded that the politicians should provide reasons for why the unrest had happened. A few attempts at explanations were made, but the coalition government offered little in the way of explaining the background to the events. The general impression in Britain was that the government was busy prosecuting the offenders rather than offering meaningful and viable explanations to the public. As a consequence, an unfortunate political vacuum ensued, which in turn led to a great deal of speculation.

There is no doubt that the causes of the riots were diverse and manifold and that the complex situations underlying them cannot be explained by any one single factor. But in this article I shall

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try to use British society, both past and present, as a model to explain why riots occur and why, as Ackroyd indicates, they occur regularly.

### Britain's past as explanation

Britain was the first country in the world to experience industrialisation. From the latter decades of the 18th century and into the 19th century, the country was completely transformed from a rural to an urban society. People who were made redundant in the agricultural sector sought work in the rapidly expanding industries and settled in and around the cities. Gradually, urbanisation changed the social fabric of British society and a more clearly defined working class emerged. In addition to an established land-owning class, the aristocracy, and a manual working class, a new middle class also saw the light of day and the first phase of industrialisation (about 1780-1830) brought political, social and economic changes to the population. It clearly sharpened divisions between people and created gaps between those who had and those who did not have. Throughout most of the 19th century, often referred to as the British Century, Queen Victoria presided over a population that gradually improved its living standards, but still retained class differences.

Britain had traded extensively with other parts of the world since the English Renaissance in the 16th century and had acquired and developed huge overseas territories. During the 19th century Britain manifested its position as the world's leading imperial nation and the British Empire reached its peak in the early 1900s covering nearly one fourth of the globe.

The 20th century brought great changes to Britain and the rest of the western world. Two world wars and the USA's new role changed Britain's fortunes, especially after World War II. On the industrial front, the country had been overtaken by the United States and other western countries that were able to supply better and cheaper products. Moreover, Britain's relative economic decline was matched by its diminished political role as the changed world order prompted the dissolution of the Empire. External and internal changes brought Britain to a state of industrial and economic stagnation in the 1960s and 70s, when many of the country's traditional industries went into decline.

This development continued into the 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister (1979–1990), and it left many industrial areas desolate. Thatcher's monetarist policies sought to reduce public spending, privatise nationally owned industries and curb the influence of the trade unions, which had become powerful during the previous decades. Thatcher's reforms had a devastating effect on some working-class communities, as they left many people unemployed. In fact, unemployment topped 3 million in 1982 and many of the communities never recovered.

A new 'underclass' came into being which felt alienated and isolated from the rest of society, and which expressed its dismay in demonstrations and riots in the early 80s, not in dissimilar fashion to the riots in August last year. In the early 80s, Labour stood by their supporters and mounted fierce political opposition to Thatcher and her right-wing political approach.

### Contemporary society as explanation

The purpose of this short historical backdrop is to prepare us to look into contemporary social, economic and political structures in order to detect possible reasons for last year's riots. Has history bequeathed so much inequality to contemporary society that it alone can account for such violent civil unrest as we saw in 2011? Are the social structures of contemporary Britain preventing groups of people from participating in society on equal terms?

Clearly, it is beyond doubt that Britain tops many negative statistics like for example those for teenage pregnancy, child poverty and single mothers, and there are increasing numbers of people, especially in inner city areas, that have been out of work for years and even generations. In the aftermath of the unrest, many people came forward and claimed that they lacked opportunities and felt they had been stripped of any chance of taking part in the mainstream of society. Years of deprivation, socially, politically and educationally, and years of unemployment have left many people in the affected areas marginalised and without hope for the future. Many people in these areas live on the periphery of society and feel they are victims of historical processes and long-term political neglect. Although that does not excuse them for criminal behaviour,



Margaret Thatcher waving to well-wishers outside 10 Downing Street after her third election victory in 1987 (©NTB scanpix)

it does offer a partial explanation for their aggressive and reckless conduct, obviously directed at the authorities. Few, if any, politicians have attempted to admit to structural failures and suggested ways in which these conditions can be changed. Two reports on the uprisings, published in November 2011, concluded that the complex reasons mentioned in this article were motivating factors for people to participate in the riots.

Cleverly, Labour did not try to make political capital out of the riots, but rather, together with the government, condemned the criminal behaviour of those who took part in them. Labour was in government from 1997 to 2010 and did little to stimulate growth in the areas affected. In fact, with Labour's modernisation in the early 90s the party moved away from the traditional working class in search of more middle-class support that could win them elections. Politically, Labour succeeded, but their transformation involved deserting the weakest groups in society. Consequently, these marginalised groups, at least in theory, do not have any political representation any longer and there is nobody stating their case. It is not unusual in such circumstances that people take to the streets to voice their views.

As briefly mentioned earlier, this also happened in the early 80s when Thatcher enforced enormous cutbacks in public spending. However, there is an important difference between the Thatcher years and 2011: in 1981 the Thatcher government passed a Nationality Act that effectively changed

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the status of citizenship and nationality in Britain. The Act particularly hit many immigrants from the former colonies who were already struggling due to Thatcher's economic policies. Therefore the riots in 1981 were partially racially motivated, as many people in the areas in question felt doubly marginalised. Last year's riots were not racially motivated, although a number of Black Britons living in the troubled areas took part in them.

### Conclusion

Even though it is hard to pinpoint what the exact reasons for last year's riots were, it seems apparent that the majority of them may be found within the structures of British society. Some of these structures are clearly rooted in the country's history and have developed over time, while others, like the current financial crisis for example, are more obviously contemporary. Furthermore, there is no doubt that many of the activities which took place during those August days were criminal and that the people involved should be punished accordingly. However, it seems too short-sighted to write off these groups as criminal elements and avoid exploring the complex backcloth any further. It is the job of the politicians to go beyond the surface and investigate how to engage these marginalised groups in constructive dialogue in order to try to improve their situation. In the 1980s they were left to fend for themselves, and at the moment of writing the pattern seems to be repeating itself. It is one thing to describe the illness, but if you do not analyse the diagnosis, you cannot be expected to be able to prescribe the correct medication.



8 August 2011: A woman jumps from a burning building in Surrey Street, Croydon. Riots and looting had broken out all across Greater London and were spreading across the country following the shooting of Mark Duggan by police in Tottenham, North London, on 4 August. (©NTB scanpix)

# Read It!

## Asweh\* Af!

Stephen Kelman's novel *Pigeon English*, shortlisted for the Man Booker prize last year, gives Norwegian readers an opportunity to step outside the comfort zone of "London for tourists". His novel is set on a council estate in South London and is narrated by 11-year-old Harri Opuka, who has recently immigrated to London from Ghana. Harri's innocent curiosity makes for a vivid and unvarnished depiction of how he and his family try to carve out a new life for themselves in an area where poverty, crime and social problems prevail. Fortunately, Harri embraces his new life as if it were all one great adventure:

The buildings are all mighty round here. My tower is as high as the lighthouse in Jamestown. There are three towers all in a row: Luxembourg House, Stockholm House and Copenhagen House. I live in Copenhagen House. My flat is on floor 9 out of 14. It's not even hutious\*, I can look from the window now and my belly doesn't even turn over. I love going in the lift, it's brutal, especially when you're the only one in there. Then you could be a spirit or a spy. You even forget the pissy smell because you're going so fast. (\*frightening)

Needless to say his life in London contrasts sharply with his former life in Ghana, which he refers to simply as "where I used to live". Although Harri makes many keen observations about his new surroundings and the local residents in his area, many of whom are alcoholics, drug addicts or mentally ill, he is never defeated by the misery and deprivation around him.

What saves him from becoming brutalised and cynical is his immaturity. He does not understand the full implications of what goes

on around him and in this way he is shielded from at least some of the harsh realities that an inner city childhood entail. Because of this he is an unreliable yet infinitely charming narrator, and much of the novel's appeal is to be found exactly in this discrepancy between Harri's limited understanding of his own situation and the reader's more comprehensive knowledge. We cannot help smiling at Harri's childish preoccupations and naïve remarks as he struggles to find his place in the urban jungle.

Even when Harri experiences something deeply traumatic his tone remains matter of fact. A boy he knows has been killed outside a fried chicken shop and Harry is looking at the scene of the crime. There is blood on the pavement and a police tape saying "Do not cross". Stoically, Harri thinks about his relationship to this boy and wonders what he might do about it:

Me and the dead boy were only half friends, I didn't see him very much because he was older and he didn't go to my school. He could ride his bike with no hands and you never even wanted him to fall off. I said a prayer for him inside my head. It just said sorry. That was all I could remember. I pretended like if I kept looking hard enough I could make the blood move and go back in the shape of a boy. I could bring him back alive that way. It happened before, where I used to live there was a chief who brought his son back like that. It was a long time ago, before I was born. Asweh\*, it was a miracle. It didn't work this time. (\*I swear)

Many of Harri's most notable features are apparent in this extract – he is a doer, somebody who wants to make a difference. An incurable optimist with a strong belief in the supernatural, he even thinks that if he applies himself to it, he may actually succeed in