

Do the Rabble Have a Cause? Moments of Insurrection in the English Riots

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Do the Rabble Have a Cause? Moments of Insurrection in the English Riots

By: Alasdair Dawney

“Take hold, and take what you require! ...the rabble ceases to be a rabble only when it *takes hold*.”

Max Stirner¹

In this paper I interpret recent rioting in England as a form of insurrection and fleeting resistance to authority, and attempt to understand moments that demonstrate a revolutionary dynamic without any apparent teleological programme for revolution.

I will use alternative critical approaches to interrogate a social mutiny not accurately represented by classical Marxist understandings of a proletarian class struggle, but rather, in Zygmunt Bauman’s words, as “riots of defective and disqualified consumers” exploding from the “minefield” of endemic consumerism mixed with social inequality.²

While Bauman suggests that the riots can only be explained in terms of “because of”, I contend that there is a certain elusive power in the very absence of an answer to the question “what for?”

In so doing, I aim to bypass negative reactions of moral compassion or condemnation, by concentrating on the transgressive gestures of the riots as positive refutations of state and capital control. I try to place these gestures within the broad spectrum of revolutionary activity as part of an historical anti-establishment current of pointedly criminal insurrection. Applying radical theory, derived from Georg W F Hegel and Max Stirner’s conceptions of the ‘rabble’ as an insurrectionary subject, to these gestures, I will examine their potential for subverting or upsetting societal power relations.

“Anarchy in the UK”³

Events across England during August 2011⁴ shocked British society into a heightened state of moral panic⁵ enhanced by the fluid volatility of the situation. A sense of fear and

¹ In *The Ego and Its Own* (1995; 229)

² See “The London Riots – on consumerism coming home to roost”, in *Social Europe Journal* online, posted 9th August 2011

³ The *Daily Star* appropriated the Sex Pistols’ famous song title for their front page headline on Tuesday 9th August 2011, accompanied by a photograph of a “hooded thug” in front of a burning car.

⁴ Commonly referred to as the London riots, acts of criminal damage, theft and threats to the civil peace were manifest across the capital and several other English towns and cities between the 7th and 10th August 2011, following an initial altercation on 6th August arising from a dispute between the police and members of the Tottenham community enquiring about the death of Mark Duggan.

urgency propelled public reaction, prompting traditional news providers to utilise emergent social media both as a platform and a source of information.⁶ This hyperactive reportage blurred opinion and fact, and hastened the establishment of a Gramscian ‘common sense’ distorted by apocalyptic sensationalism.⁷

Though efforts have been made to link events to wider patterns in society such as the welfare cuts stemming from the global recession, the dominant trope of this cultural consensus is the conservative impulse “to condemn a little more and understand a little less”⁸—a criminal ‘underclass’ portrayed as opportunistic “hulking louts”,⁹ and represented using ‘chav’ cultural imagery to affect class-based prejudices in the creation of a nebulous scapegoat.

These “louts” disparate public acts of protest, disorder and burglary were fused by the media and the political class into a loosely cohesive inflammation of immoral aspects of society, defined by the deputy prime minister Nick Clegg as a “nihilistic outbreak of acquisitive crime”.¹⁰ This representation dismisses the attachment of any legitimate challenge to the establishment, or any rebellion with a justifiable cause, to the criminal actions and actors of the English riots.

On the contrary, I will argue that the very elements of the riots that are most maligned in public opinion—specifically “mindless” acts of criminal damage, violence against the police and mass looting—possess a singular energy that stress-tests the state and the dominion of capitalism, by symbolically and physically undermining notions of authority and systems of economic exchange. I will attempt to portray these aspects of the English riots as radical moments of positive insurrection that pose a new challenge to normative ideas of ideologically programmatic ‘revolution’.

As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, the riots have presented a “zero-degree protest, a violent action demanding nothing” that could be conceived in terms of the “post-ideological” (Žižek, 2011: Para. 3). Such action achieves for a moment a ‘revolutionary’ objective of transforming power relations – whether through appropriation of commodities or attacks on the police – but there is no revolutionary programme to implement. Thus Žižek aligns the riots with the “abstract negativity” that Hegel saw as

⁵ As defined by Stan Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972) as a cultural campaign of negative stereotyping waged upon societal elements that threaten the norms and values of the status quo.

⁶ For analysis of the role of Twitter in particular, see ‘How Twitter was used to spread – and knock down – rumour during the riots’ in *The Guardian Online*, 7th December 2011.

⁷ As Nick Davies has shown in his study of UK journalism, *Flat Earth News*, consensus in the journalistic sphere can allow incendiary stories to be built on dangerously reactionary lines (Davies, 2009; pp.127-131)

⁸ In the famous words of former UK Prime Minister John Major in interview with the *Mail on Sunday*, 21st February 1993, at a comparable time of moral panic, with violent teenagers cast as ‘folk devils’, after the abduction and murder of toddler James Bulger in Liverpool.

⁹ See Peter Hitchens’ blog post: ‘Police water cannon and plastic bullets? After 50 years of the most lavish welfare state on earth? What an abject failure.’ In the *Mail Online*, posted 14th August 2011

¹⁰ Spoken at a Whitehall press conference on the 16th August 2011 (see ‘Nick Clegg announces “riot payback” scheme’ in *The Guardian*, 17th August 2011)

an irrational violence through which the disenfranchised ‘rabble’ might express their discontent (ibid).

Following Zizek’s distinction, it is this ‘rabble’ that I shall now address and postulate as an insurrectionary subject.

“A rabble of paupers”

Words such as ‘rabble’ and ‘pauper’ may seem unlikely tools for a positive re-appraisal of the ‘underclass’. Yet these words are most appropriate. They serve at once to highlight the latent Dickensian connotations of the modern idea of an ‘underclass’, and imbue it with a history and theoretical background that allow for it to be more easily analysed as a sociological unit.

As something beyond the loose idea of an iconoclastic ‘mob’, Jerzy Z. Muller traces the lineage of modern notions of the ‘underclass’ or ‘rabble’ to Justus Möser, who first drew attention to the threat to stable social order posed by an impoverished, disenfranchised group made up of those travelling from rural to urban locales in search of work and finding a precarious place on the edge of labour, in late 18th century Germany (Muller, 2002: 172). Hegel saw this group as an inevitable and dangerous social problem for civil society created by fluctuations of the market, and he suggested that the growth of a “rabble of paupers” must be tackled by government regulation, and most importantly the provision of jobs (ibid: 160-161).

In the context of the English riots, Hegel’s notion of the ‘rabble’ is useful in providing a definition of an alternative ‘revolutionary’ class—perhaps more aptly described as a ‘rebellious’ class¹¹—to Marx’s proletariat. The ‘rabble’ are drawn together not by a shared stake in society and a collective wish for improved social justice, but by their lack of ties to the state, and existence in opposition to it. According to Hegel:

“Poverty in itself does not make men into a rabble; a rabble is created only when there is joined to poverty a disposition of mind, an inner indignation against the rich, against society, against the government, etc.” (Hegel, 1820: §244)

Poverty is an underlying factor, but not on its own an identifying characteristic of the ‘rabble’. This point is reaffirmed as Hegel notes the relativity of poverty: that the minimum level of subsistence (which in itself determines membership of society) “varies considerably in different countries.” (ibid)

Hegel’s insights aid an understanding of the motivations behind the English riots, whose “disqualified consumers” (Bauman, op. cit) were not materially poor in a sense that

¹¹ A distinction based in the absence of a proposed new order. This distinction is eloquently developed by Albert Camus in *The Rebel* (1962)

bears resemblance to the conditions that tend to provoke popular insurrections.¹² If indignation is a distinguishing characteristic of the ‘rabble’, it follows that, if we take rioters as ‘rabble’, their targeting of commerce and the police may enact not just frustration, but also a conscious confrontation with forces that oppress them. The fact that they did not have a message to deliver does not make their rebellion any less of a symbolic act of refutation and confrontation.

For Hegel, the existence of the ‘rabble’, “concomitant” to the “luxury of the business classes”, is a threatening adjunct to civil society (1820: §245). Hegel could not resolve this challenge to the state, instead stressing the importance of the question of “how poverty is to be abolished” (ibid). ‘Young Hegelian’ Max Stirner, espousing his philosophy of *The Ego and Its Own*, answered this question emphatically: each individual ‘pauper’ must “take hold”. For Stirner, the ‘pauper’ is a symbolic figure, bearing and expressing the marks of state hypocrisy by his very existence as an outsider—a subject whose position as a ‘have-not’ is inherently immoral and criminal (1995: 227). Stirner argues that the perpetuation of ‘pauperism’ performs a vital function for the perpetuation of the state by affirming its control of property (ibid). Therefore, for Stirner, the abolishment of poverty equals the destruction of the state-as-proprietor.

Stirner advocates “taking hold” as a *modus operandi* for the ‘pauper’. This “taking hold” is the appropriation of the egoistically desired through “might”, leading to an apparent regression, an anti-Hobbesian return to the ‘freedoms’ of the “war of all against all” (Stirner, 1995: 229).¹³ Hegel’s ‘rabble of paupers’ is thus placed at the vanguard of egoistic insurrection, and its objective to free each “unique one” through the dissolution of “sacred concepts”. As Stirner proposes:

“If men reach the point of losing respect for property, every one will have property, as all slaves become free men as soon as they no longer respect the master as master...I am proprietor of *everything that I require* and can get possession of.” (1995: 229)

But do actions within the English riots display tendencies that really fit with Stirner’s ideas? As with the ‘illegalists’, whose theft-as-liberty doctrine sprang from the “milieu” of Stirnerite individual anarchism in early 20th century France,¹⁴ it is a difficult task to try to imagine exactly which actions, if any, were conceived of under egoistic principles matching Stirner’s vision. However, without implying that a fully conscious *egoist* policy

¹² Recent research by *The Guardian* suggests a generally low-income demographic, but a direct correspondence between poverty and looting is not established. This is in contrast with, for example, the extreme social hardships that factored into the Tunisian uprising in spring 2011.

¹³ The “war” mentioned being the *state of nature* that Hobbes wished to free humanity from through his vision of *The Leviathan* and its ostensibly improved possibilities for self-preservation.

¹⁴ See Richard Parry’s *The Bonnot Gang* (1987) for a summary of ‘illegalist’ theory and a portrayal of the egoistic energies behind gangs of French armed robbers.

was subjectively employed, I will here try to draw parallels between Stirner's *egoism* and certain details of this summer's riots.

Insurrectionary gestures

One of the focal points, in an examination of the content of this English rebellion that searches for traits that may support a Stirnerite reading, is the extent to which its actors have "taken hold", and negated societal norms and values. For every "sacred concept" targeted, attacked or questioned, a blow is struck for *egoism*. In this sense, the attacks on police and the looting of chain stores would appear to be the main thrust of such a reading, as they show a disdain for, and take action against, the most powerful emblems of discipline and mass culture in capitalist modernity.

As agents and enforcers of state control, the police force can be seen to physically embody the state. The violence directed at police during the riots, no matter what its roots were in terms of subjective reason, should not be underestimated. Violence against the police *is*, in Stirner's sense, action against the state, both symbolic and physical. As one can attach myriad meanings to such action, to suggest that this is Stirner's theory in practice may seem crude, but Stirner's *egoism* does describe its essence very well. In this action, to use Stirner's terms, a "unique person" is attempting to free his or her "ownness" from the shackles of "fixed ideas" (in this case, particularly the state and its notions of law) by way of insurrection.

Through looting, a similar challenge is launched at another "fixed idea" or "sacred concept": consumerism and its secular miracles of transubstantiation.¹⁵ By stealing that which has a particular value ascribed to it, the looter momentarily collapses and undoes the system of capitalist commodity exchange.

This could be seen as a dynamic response to the problem of "deferred gratification" or "purposiveness" noted by John Maynard Keynes as a major discontent of capitalism. The immediacy of the looter's pillage breaks with what Keynes considered the privileging of the "remote future results of our actions", and with it an effort "to secure a spurious and delusive immortality" (cited in Muller, 2002: 319). Keynes, (ironically privileging the future himself) suggested that capitalist society would have to "go on pretending that fair is foul and foul is fair" until a more affluent future allows traditional—and ostensibly 'good'—values and virtues to return (ibid: 320). The rioters instead struck at the heart of this capitalist hypocrisy, and echoed Stirner's desire to "take a lesson" from dubious "great causes" (i.e. God, the state etc.) and "instead of further unselfishly serving those great egoists, rather to be the egoist myself." (Stirner, 1995: 6)

¹⁵ Intended to evoke Marx's profoundly satirical conflation of value in capitalist commodity exchange with Catholic ritual in *Capital Volume Two* (Marx, 1977 London: Lawrence and Wishart: 133)

Zygmunt Bauman has a different interpretation: these “defective and disqualified consumers” (op. cit), were trying to *join* consumerism, rather than to dismantle it or the social structure behind it. For Bauman, the way in which shopping has saturated ideas of existential fulfilment means that “non-shopping is the jarring and festering stigma of a life un-fulfilled” (Bauman, 2011), a stigma that must be cast off by any means necessary.

Bauman’s comments are insightful, providing a convincing description of exclusionary consumer-equals-citizen conditions that may give way to violence (ibid; para. 3-5). The late novelist J.G. Ballard, in his intuitive 2006 dystopia *Kingdom Come*, also foresaw this possibility, showing how such conditions’ inherent tensions might transform into new types of fascism.¹⁶ While I agree with both writers’ understandings of hyper-consumerism’s brittle social structure, I propose that ruptures presented by the English riots have demonstrated something instead cognate to egoistic insurrection. Rioters’ actions can be seen to comprise a revolt in tune with Stirner’s ethics of criminality, with practical precedents in the aforementioned advent of French ‘illegalism’, or the popular wave of ‘proletarian shopping’ (theft and self-reduction of prices) in Italy during the 1970s.¹⁷

As in these phenomena, in the English riots, groups that draw parallels with ‘unions of egoists’, Stirner’s idea of egoists banding together for—and only for—mutual gain (1995: 276) sporadically emerged. This “multiplication of my force” (ibid) can be seen in the collective strategies used to maximise the yield of looting, from combined efforts to smash shop windows, to the sharing of information on social networks. Perhaps the most salient point to support the idea of ‘the union of egoists’ in action is the revelation that London’s ‘postcode wars’ – bitter gang rivalries based on territory – were dissolved during the riots, so that they would not interfere with action towards a common goal (theft) or against a common enemy (the police).¹⁸ This unification supports the idea of the riots in some way representing a collective insurrection.

The gestures I enlist and discuss above promote the hypothesis of the egoistic *rioter-as-insurrectionist*. This should not be taken as a conclusive or fully rounded picture of the *rioter-as-actor*, but is fashioned as an affirmation, a radical reading against the conservative consensus.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the implications of Ballard’s book, the links between consumerism and fascism and the aesthetics of Nazi Germany, see Mike Holliday, [A Fascist State? Another Look at Kingdom Come and Consumerism](#) (2010)

¹⁷ See John Cunningham, [Make Total Destroy](#) (2011)

¹⁸ See ‘The four day truce: gangs suspended hostilities during the English riots’ in *The Guardian Online*, 6th December 2011

The Imagination of Lawlessness¹⁹

A *rioter-as-insurrectionist* hypothesis suggests that the English riots were a challenge to established tenets of English society, in some ways more potent than other recognised rebellions against the state.

While the aftermath of the global financial crisis has arguably created a new platform in the west for leftist voices subdued since “the collapse of actually existing socialism” in the late 1980s (Noys, 2011: 7), popular movements such as *Occupy...* fail to enact radical dissent against the popular wave of neoliberalist economics. Rather than fully opposing capitalism and parliamentary democracy, *Occupy...* appears as a plea to politicians to regenerate and more efficiently deliver the images of the ‘good life’ they promise. The *rioter-as-insurrectionist*, on the other hand, attacks society with no equivalent request.

Again, Stirnerite insurrectionism is more radical than classical anarchism. Stripped of teleological goals such as *mutual aid*²⁰, the *rioter-as-insurrectionist* simply negates contemporary norms and values, finding power in not being bound by any utopian devotion to an ideal future. As these norms and values re-assert themselves with “punitive expeditions” (Bauman, 2011 [2]: Para 6)²¹ we may well see—as Bauman has predicted (*ibid*)—resurgent inflammations from the “minefield” from which the original disturbances came.

Whether a rallying ‘rabble’ may eventually “take hold” and sustain the kind of insurrection that Max Stirner had in mind, one that lays waste to “sacred concepts” and, through imaginative illegalism, creates a new *egoist* (in)equality, remains to be seen.

¹⁹ In Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Eye*, the protagonist, upon undertaking suicide, realises the absurdity of absolute freedom and upon considering his amoral license to kill and rape concludes that “the imagination of lawlessness has a limited range” (Nabokov, 1992: 27). Albert Camus, exploring the same problem in *The Rebel*, proceeds to proclaim that “everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt the validity of my own proclamation and I am compelled to believe, at least in my own protest. The first, and only datum that is furnished me, within absurdist experience, is rebellion.” (Camus, 1962: 16)

²⁰ Peter Kropotkin’s concept, succinctly stated in Herbert Read’s *The Paradox of Anarchism*

²¹ For instance, in condemning rioters to *rule-by-law* use of inordinately long prison sentences, see ‘UK riots: court of appeal upholds lengthy sentences’ in *The Guardian Online*, 18th October 2011

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