I was standing on a street corner in Chapeltown, Leeds, near a Bonfire Party that was blocking a side-street off Spencer Place. Camera in hand, I was looking for some shots and maybe some interviews for the neighbourhood paper, Chapeltown News, that I helped to produce on our kitchen table using a typewriter, Letraset and Cow Gum. It was the 5th November 1975. Chapeltown News was accused by its detractors of being too political and too depressing, with its regular stories of police brutality, racist teachers, bullying employers and global injustice. We offset this radical diet with lighter stories about football teams and weddings. Everyone knows that Bonfire Night is fun, so that’s what I was trying to capture. (Isn’t it interesting that an intended act of terrorism – blowing up the Houses of Parliament – has come down to us as fun?)

Perhaps 50 young black men and women were milling about. A Ford Escort drove slowly through this little crowd gathered on Spencer Place. That street was notorious for kerb-crawlers looking for prostitutes and I thought nothing of the car passing me by – until the black man next to me, about 16 years old, bent down, picked something up, and hurled it at full force through the driver’s side window. The glass shattered, the car stopped momentarily, and then sped off at full speed.

All boundaries had suddenly collapsed.

In shock, in horror, I said to the young man: “What did you do that for?”
He said: “Don’t worry, they were plain clothes cops.”
I said: “Oh, that’s alright then.”

There was no sign he had ‘lost it’. He seemed quite calm. There was no discernible rage. No fear. It is possible he had placed the half brick on the ground earlier that evening – there had been some trouble with the police and the fire brigade on that spot the previous year. If I was on the verge of losing it, his explanation made perfect sense, and I then felt completely calm. In me, order had been restored. On the streets of Chapeltown, a particular type of disorder was about to erupt.
I had lived in the multi-ethnic, inner-city area of Leeds known as Chapeltown for about five years by then. From 1972 to 1974 I’d been pretending to write an ethnographic study of the Chapeltown Community Association (CCA) for a PhD. Instead, I had become completely immersed in radical ‘community’ action, with the CCA and, increasingly, with *Chapeltown News*. It was impossible to do this voluntary work without hearing all the time about police harassment of young black men. When, more than twenty years later, I wrote the long abandoned thesis, I found this 1972 submission by Chapeltown’s United Caribbean Association (UCA), to a Parliamentary Select Committee:

Harassment, intimidation and wrongful arrest go on all the time in Chapeltown; black teenagers returning from Youth Centres to their homes in groups are jostled by the police, and when the youths protest, police reinforcements with dogs are always ready just round corners [...] Police boot and fist youths into compelling them to give wrong statements, but the right one that the police requires [...] We believe that policemen have every black person under suspicion of some sort and for that reason every black immigrant here in Leeds mistrusts the police, because we think that their attitudes are to start trouble, not prevent it.¹

The UCA contained members who were advocates of Black Power.² They were highly suspicious of me and the handful of middle-class white leftists who, as they saw it, were interfering with local politics in the neighbourhood. But the signature to this document was that of Mrs Gertrude Paul, the chair of the UCA, and Leeds’ only black school-teacher; Mrs Paul was by no means a militant. The submission captures a period in the history of the post-war (un)settlement of African-Caribbeans in England in which black people of all ages and all political positions were fully aware, and extremely critical, of police racism and brutality. Throughout the UK they were making their views known to the establishment through the normal democratic channels – such as this submission to the Select Committee on Race and Immigration. Leeds had pioneered a scheme in which black people were involved in educating and training its police force in these matters. (This, after all, was the notorious force whose members had harassed the Nigerian vagrant David Oluwale, last seen in 1969 being pursued by two police officers down the bank of the Leeds canal. These officers were acquitted of his murder, but convicted of assault in 1971.)³

On Bonfire Night in 1975, the ‘Leeds Scheme’ for police-community relations was in smithereens. Shortly after the attack on their unmarked car, the police arrived in numbers. Standing on Spencer Place I had an image of a famous photo I had seen from the May ’68 near-revolution in Paris – a *flic* in ‘riot’ gear, with his truncheon in the air, pursuing a revolting student. While taking my version of this photo, imagining syndication rights across the British press, the cop running into my viewfinder punched me in the face. His colleague had been injured. Black youth were threatening his rule. Had this officer ‘lost it’, striking me in the height of passion?

Deeply ignorant, despite all I had heard and read, of the realities of policing Leeds, I went to an officer at a police car nearby and said: “I want to make a complaint. I have been assaulted by a policeman”. Without a word, the officer got me in a headlock, banged my head against the car door, and stuffed me inside. I didn’t struggle; I wasn’t
shocked: I was dumbfounded, stilled. This officer had certainly not ‘lost it’: he was cool, calm, collected and doing his job. He told the driver to take me to the police station, where I was charged with ‘threatening behaviour’.

During the ‘riot’ that erupted, two uniformed policemen had nearly died when their police car was bricked and they had lost control and hit a tree. Many others were reported injured. Afterwards, eleven black youths were also arrested. When they associated me with Chapeltown News, they added ‘assaulting a policeman’, ‘affray’ and ‘incitement to riot’ to my charge list. They had decided to teach me a lesson. I was acquitted, after a six-week trial, as were all the youths who pleaded not guilty. My defence was that they had fabricated their evidence, which consisted of four officers lying about what they said they had seen. The black youths offered the defence that their confessions were the result of violence and intimidation by the arresting officers. Meeting the jury afterwards, we found that they had acquitted us because half of them – white, working class, Leeds men in their twenties – had also been the victims of police intimidation and the fabrication of evidence. But the judge said he was expecting to sentence me to six or seven years.

About ten years later, I bumped into the policeman who led the evidence against me. “Remember me?” he said. “Yes of course I do, you fitted me up in the Bonfire Night trial.” Somehow, I refrained from adding “you bastard”, but my heart was pounding. My first child was only nine months during the six-week trial in the summer of 1976, and my barrister had not been confident I would be acquitted. I had spent those six weeks wondering what it would be like in prison, separated from those I loved. “Well, it’s just water under the bridge, isn’t it?” said this stalwart of the rule of law. It clearly was, for him. Just doing his job; nothing emotional; nothing serious. I said nothing. My adult self-restraint had clicked into gear, even though my re-awakened trauma was vivid.

Normative frameworks

‘Rioting’ is discursively framed throughout the mainstream media and political commentary as ‘anarchic’, where anarchy is understood to be a situation outside of the codes that constrain social life and divorced from the regulatory processes of law. Critical thinkers immediately recognize that this frame is imposed by a society that only accepts its own normative codes and its own laws as viable, designed as they are for the maintenance of the type of order that provides security for its own elites. To highlight their re-framing of this discourse Marxists would insert ‘bourgeois’ before ‘normative codes’ and ‘capitalist’ before ‘law’. These codes were stretched to their limit. A front page article in The Sun’s (11th August 2011) drew attention to how wide the anarchic forces were seen to be in August 2011. It referred not simply the ‘feral youths’ other headline writers demonized, but those thought to be fully integrated into the normative framework of bourgeois society: a lifeguard, a postman, a teacher, a millionaire’s daughter. (The latter, given the widespread representation in British tabloids of the dissolute rich, might have been a sub-editor’s knowing joke).

Foucauldians, with their more subtle understanding of power, would point out that the whole discourse of order in the modern period was produced within an episteme that explained why and how the uncouth body must be tamed; (capitalist) modernity then produced a regime that justified machinery through which bodies would be under
perpetual surveillance and kept in their place. (I suggest that the extremely speedy arrest and conviction of about 4,000 of the August 2011 ‘rioters’ resulted from the insertion of CCTV footage into face-recognition software programmes – as illustrated in the deeply silly, but nevertheless instructive, BBC TV drama *Spooks.*)\(^4\) So, within bourgeois, capitalist understandings of the properly restrained body, ‘rioting’ represents ‘losing it’ big-time: the utter loss of order, and the emergence of a horde of unconstrained bodies – many of whom fail even to disguise themselves, so far have they escaped from rational self-discipline.

I had not heard of Foucault in 1975, but my steady move from an anarchist to a Marxist philosophy, of the C.L.R. James variety,\(^5\) was underway. It was simple, therefore, to see that the Bonfire Night ‘riot’ was only understandable as anarchic if you perceived the black youths’ actions to be essentially unreasonable, and not merely illegal. But these youths had not lost their minds; quite the opposite. Some of them were becoming Rastafarians, adopting that religion’s profound commitment to equal rights and justice, and its advocacy that, as The Wailers sang, black people must ‘Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights, Don’t give up the fight’.\(^6\) The following year, The Wailers put the words of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie’s 1935 speech to the United Nations into their song ‘War’. Its lyrics illustrate the politics of Rastafarianism better than most of the books on this topic. The first verses go like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Until the philosophy which hold one race superior} \\
\text{And another} \\
\text{Inferior} \\
\text{Is finally} \\
\text{And permanently} \\
\text{Discredited} \\
\text{And abandoned -} \\
\text{Everywhere is war -} \\
\text{Me say war.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{That until there no longer} \\
\text{First class and second class citizens of any nation} \\
\text{Until the colour of a man's skin} \\
\text{Is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes -} \\
\text{Me say war.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{That until the basic human rights} \\
\text{Are equally guaranteed to all,} \\
\text{Without regard to race -} \\
\text{Dis a war.}\(^7\)
\end{align*}
\]

With reggae being played in this period most week-ends at Sound System clashes and Blues parties across Chapeltown, it functioned as a far more effective street newspaper than did *Chapeltown News*. Alongside the regular gatherings to read the Bible and undertake the Rastafarian reasoning process (which generated an ‘overstanding’ of society, since Rastas would never be ‘under’ anything, least of all the white man’s language) early reggae helped create a political consciousness that was historically informed and perfectly clear about what was wrong with black people’s position in capitalist society (or Babylon, as they named it). Rastafari was unashamed about
initiating a war on black youths’ most immediate oppressors, the police. While only two of those arrested were overt followers of Rastafarianism, running the Sound System they called Screaming Target, the philosophy was widely supported by black youths, and vigorously repudiated by their parents. The parents saw quite clearly that there was a ‘lost generation’ in the making. These youngsters not only turned their back on their parents’ devotion to Christianity (Rastafari utilized Biblical texts rejected in the King James bible), but deliberately altered their consciousness with marijuana. This was offensive to the older generation not simply because it was breaking the law and bringing the youths into the criminal justice system, but because ‘weed’ was discursively transformed into a sacred act, required by the faith, and thus further removing the youths from the normative framework of their church-going parents.

But their ‘overstanding’ of the situation was not as antinomian as its detractors thought it to be. When I interviewed two of my Rastafarian co-defendants after the trial, they said this:

In Chapeltown the white people and the black get on alright, but it’s the police you see they won’t give us a chance […] the white community and the black in Chapeltown are like brother and sister like it says in the Bible, but the youth have been forced to think of the police as not human. The police once they’ve put on that uniform they become the upper class – they’ve got so much power […] The law is the law – we’re not saying we don’t want no Babylon to come into Chapeltown, we’re not saying we want to break into someone’s house and nothing is done about it, what we’re saying is we want our freedom and we want to be looked at as human beings, we want them to leave us alone and let us live our lives, enjoy our life.8

Remarks like these indicate that these black youths had by no means lost touch with those norms and values which are accepted by the vast majority of humans – thou shalt not steal – and were proclaiming what have come to be accepted, if not fully practiced, as the universal values of freedom, fraternity, justice and the integrity of the human. There might even be a tone of regret in the observation that police malpractice has ‘forced’ youths to abrogate the humanity of the police. What they have found – in the Bible, and in the modern discourse of the Enlightenment – are truly social standards by which they say they want to live.
Figure 1

I staged the photo in Figure 1 deliberately. I was trying to build a symbolic bridge between the Rasta rebels and the embryonic black middle class in Leeds. The woman in the centre is Mrs. Gertrude Paul, referred to above, who in 1976 became the city’s first black head-teacher. Her organization, the United Caribbean Association, had offered no
support to the Bonfire Night defendants, and its members had not attended the court hearing. But on the last day Mrs. Paul and one or two others appeared at court and could not avoid the joyful celebration of the defendants and their friends. Her sardonic smile was directed at me. She disapproved of me almost as much as she disapproved of the unkempt men on either side of her, and she knew she had been photographically stitched up. She might even have known that I posed the group beside the sculptures on the Town Hall steps – placed there by the bourgeoisie to exemplify their pride in Leeds’s status as a city of Empire – as an inter-textual reference to the Rastafarians’ prized Lion of Judah. As so often, this photo belied reality. One of the Rastafarians soon left the UK to return to Africa, as Marcus Garvey had enjoined, where he remains. The other – taking a trajectory which some commentators mistakenly regard as inherent in Rastafarianism – has spent much of his life in prison.

The bridge was never built. The much bigger riots in Chapeltown and Harehills in the summer of 1981 were one of the results of the 1970s radical social movements (black and Asian led) failing to sustain themselves, the ‘too little, too late’ social engineering that followed the 1975 riots, combined with the radical re-structuring of British politics and economy introduced by the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Black youth – joined on this occasion by whites from the neighbouring council estate called Gipton – were said to have caused £2 million of damage, as burning, looting and fighting with the police on Chapeltown Road and on Harehills Road broke out over the nights of 12-13 July. In *Come-Unity News* and *Big Flame*, for whom I also wrote at the time, I introduced the term ‘uprising’. I subscribed to the view best expressed by the British-Jamaican Linton Kewsi Johnson in his poem ‘Di Great Insohreckshan’10 – ‘we mash up police van, we mash up di wicked man [...] we mek dem understan dat we tek no more oppreshan’. Johnson, a leading member of the *Race Today Collective*, a black political organization inspired by the praxis of C.L.R. James, released the ‘Insurrection’ poem on his album *Making History*. A section of the eponymous poem goes like this:

```
Mekkin histri
Now tell mi someting
Mistah govahtment
Tell mi someting

How lang yu really feel
Yu coulda keep wi andah heel
Wen di trute done reveal
Bout how yu grab an steal
Bout how yu mek yu crooked deal
Mek yu crooked deal?

Well doun in Soutall
Where Peach did get fall
Di Asians dem faam up a human wall
Gense di fashist an dem police sheil
An dem show dat di Asians gat plenty zeal
Gat plenty zeal, gat plenty zeal
[...]
How lang yu really tink
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Violent urban protest

Reflecting on these events fifteen years later, I was less certain that they were as politically radical as I had thought, and I described riots as ‘proto-politics’ rather than uprisings. I took the view that ‘uprising’, or ‘insurrection’ connoted a more explicitly political agenda than seemed evident to me in 1981. By the mid 1990s my views had been shaped by various ‘riotous’ incidents in the intervening years. One, I later realized, was a scenario I observed on the night of 14th July 1981, when youths were gathering in Chapeltown and weighing up whether or not to riot again. A young white working class man I knew, of Irish origin and a supporter of the radical movement calling for British ‘Troops Out’ of Ireland, stood on the wall outside his house urging the small crowd to return to the battles of the previous night. The black youths were less enthusiastic. One of them said – referring to the media refrain that the riots had been caused by ‘outsiders’ – “Where are the outsiders now when we need them?” Several years later I learned that the white youths from neighbouring Gipton, who had been waiting for the black youths to start a riot, had arrived en masse on the 13th to raid the shops on Chapeltown Road, and then set up a small business at the back of their youth centre selling contraband cigarettes and alcohol. They had done their job and had no intention of coming back on the 14th. This reminded me of the rational underpinning of ‘riot’: people have specific (and various) motives and they weigh up the pros and cons of different types of action. The Chapeltown white man – who had grown up alongside black youths and had his own trouble with the police – shared the proto-politics of his friends; the white youths (who also hated the police, but had no truck with Rastafari) were mainly interested in looting and selling on. As I shall argue later, this is not necessarily to be dismissed as ‘mere criminality’ or ‘mindless’ violence, but there is no reason to suppose that there is much of a ‘social justice’ motive operating among these white youths, still less that they have insurrectionary aims. Clearly, the Gipton youths had ‘found it’ (booze and fags); many shop-owners had ‘lost it’ (although one, Mr. Steffenson, had had his shop protected from the ‘outsiders’ by ‘riotous’ youths who knew and liked him); the normative order of the establishment had been entirely lost; the police had lost a battle (43 were injured), and on the 14th the black youths made a strategic decision to withdraw.

The second incident illustrates another layer in the complex negotiations that take place when ‘riot’ is in the air. On 22nd June 1987 a local black youth was arrested with evident brutality on the Chapeltown ‘front line’. About 100 youths stoned passing police vehicles later that evening and damaged a couple of shops. But the following night, at
the behest of the Community Inspector, black youth workers patrolled the streets remonstrating with youths assembling, prepared for full-scale riot. ‘We’ve been here before’, they said ‘But now the police are armed and trained – you’ll be smashed up’, and the youths desisted. This much appeared in my news article. What I did not report was a conversation I witnessed as a black youth worker physically removed a stash of petrol bombs from a youngster’s hands and poured the petrol down the drain. The youth angrily denounced the worker, saying he had had his fun rioting in 1981 and had got his job on the back of those riots. Now it was their turn, he said. I do not know if that worker had actually taken part in July 1981, but it was a fact that the council introduced all kinds of programmes, including the recruitment of local black men as youth workers, as a direct result of the those events. The youth workers’ base, The Boys Club (now the Mandela Centre) was built and donated to the city by the National Association of Boys Clubs in specific charitable response to the 1981 conflagration. Again, the youths were weighing up their situation, this time consciously thinking about the recent past of their neighbourhood, and were planning to ‘lose it’ in further confrontation with the police. The older black men employed by the council went through a similar appraisal – probably including the knowledge that no-one defended the arrested youths in 1981 – and came to the opposite conclusion. Career-wise, they had found it. They had a job to do, and that job was not yet to be interpreted as an accommodation with the soft power of the local state. The youths, however, thought it was, and later, as the youth service’s black and white workers were increasingly brought to heel by the council, I came to agree with them.

Thirdly, I went to another part of Leeds to investigate the story behind a riot that broke out in July 1995. There’s something about these summer months. Yet again, the police were the trigger, but this time it was very specific. The brutality of one particular policeman, combined with the local pub’s transition from a place hospitable to drug-dealing to one openly complicit with police surveillance, led young men to burn down the pub and torch eight cars over two nights of ‘riot’. My headline for the story was ‘Riot or Protest?’. The Hyde Park area of Leeds, where these events took place, was as economically disadvantaged as Chapeltown (34% of its population was unemployed) but its social composition was quite different. Historically, and with the university expansion proceeding apace, increasingly the area where students lived side-by-side with local youth, it had also benefited from an overspill of Chapeltown’s black residents, and of becoming a place of settlement of Hindus and Muslims from the Indian subcontinent. These youths told me they were proud to be outside of the accepted racial categories. Students lose it briefly with their week-end binges, but they are the ones who have found a path to economic success. My story did not record the conversation with a full-time burglar whose economic success was based on finding five videos and TVs in each student house he visited via the attic windows of their terraced houses. (He had briefly worked as a roofer.) But it did record this, from ‘Tony’: ‘I’ve been thieving since I was seven – I started with bananas from that shop there – but I’m sick of it. I’m 22 and I’ve got three kids. I’d love to have a job and go out on a Friday and spend my money like everybody else.’ These men might be seen as having lost the path of legitimacy within the norms of the dominant order, but were yearning to find it – and one of them had indeed enrolled at the local College. But, as Danny put it, in response to a Socialist Workers Party leaflet he had read: ‘It’s got nothing to do with fucking Tony Blair [Labour Party Prime Minister at the time]’. A scene one evening when Danny rushed to support his mother Pat in a confrontation with the police prompted another explanation of what was happening in this area. With two van-loads of police outside his mother’s
door, the police helicopter overhead, officers taking photos as the confrontation wound up, I wrote: ‘Danny’s now at full pitch defending his mother, who is already calming down. The tallest of the ten or more policemen who have engaged with Pat looks very like he’s going to take a swing at Danny. Male egos, one in an official uniform and the other in the illegitimate garb of sculpted dreadlocks, confront each other with venom’. Danny was killed by drug competitors in 2002, and his mother Pat Regan became a local [s]hero when she set up Mothers Against Violence. In 2008 she was stabbed to death by her grandson. In the confrontation between the police and Danny, both sides were on the verge of losing it, but both kept just within the legal boundaries of social life. Pat’s grandson was known to have severe mental health problems, and can properly be described as having ‘lost it’ when he killed her. This toxic combination of hard masculinity, surges of anger, drugs and mental illness take us out of the range of what is usually understood as political, if ‘political’ stands for clear demands, rational strategy and the commensurate tactics. The volatile factors were clearly operating during this 1987 ‘riot’ – most of them probably kick in whenever large crowds ‘lose it’ – but we would comprehend riotous confrontation more effectively if we enlarged the definition of politics.

The themes of masculinity and race appeared again most starkly in the massive confrontations during the summer of 2001 in four Northern English cities. Described in the press as ‘race riots’ because in three cases British youth of Pakistani descent fought with white racists and with the police, the events in Leeds had a different flavour. This fourth event decisively shifted my analytical frame from ‘uprising’ to ‘violent urban protest’. In its report of the events in Leeds, the local paper wrote:

Outsiders are believed to be responsible for starting last night’s riot which rocked Harehills in Leeds. Police were ambushed at the start of six hours of rioting in which 25 cars were torched, shops and other premises wrecked and buses and cars stoned. The violence involved up to 300, mainly Asian, youths.

Far from being initiated by these ubiquitous outsiders, the ‘riot’ took place as a protest against the vicious policing, using CS gas, of a Bangladeshi family while driving through the local area. Describing the event as ‘mayhem’, the paper produced the now-familiar trope of the organized criminality and barbarism of the ‘rioters’. Its editorial stated:

[T]heories of racial feuding, heavy-handed policing and angry community dissatisfaction are rife throughout Leeds and beyond. But what seems undeniable is that rioting, which has shocked and disgraced a neighbourhood well used to peacefully sharing a diverse mixture of cultures and backgrounds, was intricately planned [and] criminally choreographed. Barbaric episodes of rioters hurling petrol bombs, bricks, wooden crates, bottles and stones, produced a depressing tableau depicting a city at odds with itself and communities uneasy with each other.

There was no ‘racial feuding’, but there was a distinct sense that British Asians – particularly those of Pakistani and Bengali descent, who predominate in Harehills – were being racialized and subjected to harsh control by the Leeds police. In the final paragraph of the paper’s editorial, the words ‘primitive’ and ‘grotesque’ appear which,
when combined with the ‘barbaric’ already quoted indicate that the editorial writer is also infected by the metaphors of the Other that have so disgraced British historiography. ‘Barbarians’, of course, never ‘lost it’ – because they had never ‘found it’ (civilization) in the first place. Now British Asian youth were placed outside the normative order of England.

But, according to my British Muslim friend who grew up in that area, and who at that time was a youth worker in Harehills, these young men were very much inside the normative order of masculinity. In a 2002 conference paper I set out what I learned from him. He told me that their attitude was: ‘We’re not going to take anything they [the police] are going to give us. You can’t treat us like this. We’re going to take a stand’. He told me that, about ten years previously, when he was growing up, British Asians used to be scared of the British African-Caribbeans who lived nearby. ‘Then there was resistance from the young Bangladeshis. It’s their turf now’.21 He went on to say that the ‘riot’ was the young Muslims’ way of showing the police, and the world at large, that they were as hard as the black British men in Leeds. If they once thought they had lost their masculinity, they had found it now.

In the conference paper referred to, and later, when trying to comprehend the relationship between this ‘riotous’ activity by British Muslims in the summer of 2001 and the Al-Qaeda attacks (New York and Washington, September 2001, London 2005 (another violent July)), I set out my suggestion that ‘violent urban protest’ is the concept which should replace ‘riot’ if we are properly to understand what has happened in English cities over the past 35 years.22 Violence is central to these events. I was told (in 2011) by a picture editor for national newspapers that the Murdoch group explicitly instructed its journalists to only use photographs of riots which included flames. My *Yorkshire Evening Post* articles on the 2001 protest in Leeds shows that discursive manoeuvre – designed to reinforce the notion that rioters’ motivations are destruction of the material and moral order – has been in place for many years. They too prominently feature fire. But it is not only the upholders of establishment norms who abhor the smashing and burning of local shops and vehicles. Rioters themselves are heard to lament that part of their action, and even people who sympathise with their complaint against the police, and their sense of disenfranchisement, say things like ‘They should attack city centre shops, not ours’. Only proponents of communist or fascist revolution are sanguine about destruction. Secondly, these events are quite specifically urban. The police can be heavy handed with their special targets in the countryside, and their victims fight back. But rioters require a specific terrain that is entirely legible to them. They prefer to go to war in their own neighbourhood because there they know they will not get lost and they know where to find their troops. When (as in 2011) they are willing to enter new territories, because the usual turf wars have been suspended, their targets are utterly familiar: the police wear the same uniform, and the high-value shops (no longer are so many locally-owned) are identical in their livery to the ones in ‘their’ neighbourhood. In towns, they know they will be able to confront the police in ranks and enjoy the sight of them in retreat (there’s not much to be gained from beating a couple of rural officers). In 1975, in 1981 and in 2001 it was not so hard to convince those who were not entirely trapped by their roles as parliamentarians or newspaper editors that there was at least some element of protest in these events. But the events of August 2011 seemed to make the ‘protest’ element of my argument harder to sustain.
2011
‘Defective consumers’ and/or protesters?

Major ‘riots’ took place in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Salford and Nottingham from 7th to 11th August 2011. ‘Disorder related’ crime also took place in Leeds, Milton Keynes, Luton and Bristol. 2,278 commercial premises were attacked, five people died, an estimated £300 million of damage was done to property, and clean-up costs were estimated at £43.5 million. Over 4,000 people were arrested, 90% of whom were already known to the police. 13 to 15,000 people are believed to have involved themselves. Sixty-six areas experienced ‘rioting’.

Conservative Home Secretary Teresa May said that those involved were ‘an unruly mob’. They were not ‘trying to make any political or social statement; they were thieving, pure and simple’.

A television drama, based on the testimony of victims of the events in Clapham, south London, utilizing TV news footage, showed ‘rioters’ attacking a man passing down the street on his motor scooter, and attempting to assault two hairdressers while escaping from the shop they were breaking into. This behaviour has no correlate with political action. In light of events like these, the respected political commentator Patrick Wintour remarked in the liberal Guardian newspaper that ‘[t]he summer riots now look more like a case of mass shoplifting than a harbinger of a darker urban uprising’.

The most interesting analysis of the 2011 ‘riots’ that I have read came (unsurprisingly, given his eminence) from the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, favourite son of Warsaw and Leeds. In an interview within days of these smash, grab and burn raids, Bauman said:

This was not a rebellion or an uprising of famished and impoverished people or an oppressed ethnic or religious minority – but a mutiny of defective and disqualified consumers, people offended and humiliated by the display of riches to which they had been denied access. We have been all coerced and seduced to view shopping as the recipe for good life and the principal solution of all life problems – but then a large part of the population has been prevented from using that recipe… City riots in Britain are best understood as a revolt of frustrated consumers.

His remarks align him with those who condemned the riots with terms like ‘an orgy of consumption’ or ‘unconstrained greed’. But Bauman’s analysis of the abject consumerism of liquid modernity – alluded to here as the fake solution to life’s problems – has always gone hand-in-hand with his sympathetic analysis of the plight of those excluded from capitalism’s cornucopia. Bauman is open about his commitment to socialism. His position is therefore not to be confused with the right-wing commentators. Far from seeing these men and women as morally defective or normatively transgressive – people who have lost the compass that the establishment’s Great Navigators hoped they had inserted in the population’s cerebral cortex – Bauman’s point was that the ‘rioters’ are utterly enmeshed with the materialistic desires which motor the economies of those countries that manufacture nothing and consume everything. He saw them as in ‘revolt’ (he also spoke of ‘mutiny’) against the humiliation they feel at not being able to consume at the level of the rich. He pointed out that this ‘rampant consumerism’ was combined with ‘rising inequality’.
Zygmunt Bauman was correct to note the complicity of the rioters with capitalist norms of ostentatious consumerism. He provided an echo of Baudrillard’s useful notion of ‘sign value’ as an important additional category to Marx’s ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’ when he said ‘We have been all coerced and seduced to view shopping as the recipe for good life’ (in the interview quoted above). Only the hair-shirt socialists and the very green completely ignore the lure of sign, whether it is a pair of trainers, a TV, a car, a fragrance or an objet d’art. I know I have been seduced. And in doing so, I can be accused of ‘losing it’: losing the proper apprehension of ‘use value’ (the value an object acquires because it meets a ‘genuine’ human need), ‘falling for’ the ephemeral, the useless. I seem to have succumbed to endorsing the value an object acquires because it is infused with the insatiable greed, the selfish yearning of people deluded by appearance. (In a craven defence I wonder if beauty really is use-less). But is ‘rampant desire for the sign’ the full explanation of these ‘riots’? Those who condemn the rioters, from the left and the right, appear to believe so: the right might be accused of hypocrisy (just because they pay top dollar, they are no less creatures of the sign), but the left at least sees their condemnation as congruent with their century-old rejection of the baubles of capitalism.

I now want to suggest that there is more to these events than the term ‘defective consumer’ implies. Although some good journalism appeared around the time of the riots, it was only when a combined effort by The Guardian newspaper and the criminology department at the London School of Economics produced detailed first-hand accounts of the motives, opinions and experiences of participants in these events that we began to obtain the evidence that we need properly to evaluate these events. The headline of one of the reports provided ample support for Bauman’s thesis: ‘Shopping for free: how the consumer generation took what it wanted’.

Interviewees – particularly younger looters – talked about the pressure and ‘hunger’ for the right brand names and the right goods: iPhones, BlackBerrys, laptops, clothing made by Gucci and Ralph Lauren. One 15-year-old girl, whose mother reported her to police, described the importance of wearing the right gear. ‘Yeah, in our generation it is [important]. Clothes. Having the nicest clothes . . . the updated things, the big tellies, the fancy phones.’

In the same report, a 19 year old man from Hackney, who went to loot Wood Green on the first night of the ‘disturbances’ (The Guardian’s term), said: ‘The rioting, I was angry. The looting, I was excited. Because, just money. I don’t know, just money-motivated. Everything that we done, just money-motivated’. ‘Snatch and grab, get anything you want, anything you ever desired’, said a 19 year old man from Battersea, while a 16 year old girl from Lavender Hill who must have had some major gifts during her short life said: ‘It was like Christmas’. She added ‘It was weird. Everyone just looked really greedy’. When the writer Jenny Turner quoted Chelsea Ives, the 18 year old ‘shamed former Olympic youth ambassador’, now in jail for violent disorder, saying ‘Trainers, clothes, mobiles, iPods, Macs – possession of these is tantamount to human rights’, it was easy to see why so many commentators on the left, centre and right were enraged by these events.

Asked if there was a ‘whiff of a desire for social change’ in these events, Bauman said: ‘So far I have failed to spot any evidence for such a desire’. He went on to endorse the view of Neal Lawson, head of the left-of-centre organization Compass, that these are the
actions of a ‘feral underclass’ which mirrored those of a ‘feral elite’. While Bauman clearly sees these ‘riots’ as a form of protest, he definitely does not see them as a politically progressive protest. Living modestly in Leeds, Bauman would appear to be repelled by the domination of popular consciousness by the glittering goods of consumer capitalism. It might even be that he regards as reactionary those who have been so befuddled by this fantasy cornucopia that they smash up its palaces.

But I would hazard the argument that refusing to pay when you act upon your ‘desire for the sign’ is a proto-political gesture. It might be an indication that you have lost the proper assessment of the relationship between ‘use’ and ‘sign’, but at least you have side-stepped the capitalist retailer’s trap of ‘exchange value’. Some ‘rioters’ clearly understood the wider context in which their actions can be placed. The Battersea 19 year old said he only stole ‘major consumer brands’, saying ‘stuff that was like industries, businesses, like big businesses like international businesses that are just raping the world anyway, and are just taking advantage of other people’s labour. So why can’t we take advantage of them for this one moment?’ He said he felt ‘revolutionary, against capitalism’. Among ‘a handful of interviewees who attempted to justify their actions by alleging that products sold by JD Sports were produced using child labour’, a 20 year-old from Clapham said: ‘JD is making what – £50 off a shoe?’ A 22 year old from Southwark said: ‘I think, personally, western society as it is, we live in a mad, materialistic society where everyone’s got to have the latest iPhone, television, whatnot. I don’t know, there’s no jobs out there and people what, they want to feel part of, they’re moving with the times I suppose, to a certain degree. And things are too expensive’. He made off with 10 iPhones and continued looting all night: it seems that he is both a bi-product of that materialistic society, and a critic of it. 86% of rioters, and 69% of the general population thought that ‘poverty’ was one of the causes of the protests. Of course when they read of the social work graduate in her parents’ comfortable home with a 27 inch TV in her bedroom and a larger one downstairs, sobbing in remorse after turning her self in for stealing another flat-screen TV from Comet in Enfield, most people will not think that poverty can be a cause of these events. 70% of those arrested, however, lived in the 30% most economically deprived areas of the country. Interestingly, the government-sponsored report does not tell us what percentage were unemployed. 70% of the people surveyed by the LSE (and 61% of the population) thought that ‘inequality’ was another cause. It turns out that most people (unlike most commentators) think that these events have multiple causes – including ‘greed’ (70% of rioters, 77% of the population).

We also need to examine the issue of how the stolen goods were distributed. An 18 year old from Birmingham described how he looted a phone shop and then threw the whole bag of phones into the air. No doubt others benefited from his largesse. Barry, a 46 year-old ‘spectator’ in Manchester said: ‘I found this iPod and as I picked it up this girl was looking at me. I just gave it to her. I actually went into one of the shops and took a load of cigarettes and I gave them to people’. Taking several items at once and giving them away (or even selling them cheap) takes the looter out of the framework which regulates the legitimate (commercial) expression of desire. ‘Losing’ the dominant system of economic regulation might be provoking the looter to ‘find’ another system of exchange.

I am not pushing this argument too far. It does not seem that the ‘riots’ provoked a large move away from capitalist exchange values. Just as the Gipton youths turned the looting
of Chapeltown’s corner shops into their own cottage industry in 1981, those of 2011 were in many cases engaging in run-of-the mill crime in order to sell the proceeds. But even here, the majority’s moral code is not completely abandoned. A young man who described himself as a ‘natural criminal’ said:

You think there’s no job out there for me, so you think fuck it, going to go out on the road and steal and sell drugs, do whatever to get your money. People our age. We don’t rob no women, no old men, no girls – we have our morals sometimes. I’m already who I am anyway, so I don’t think I’m ever going to change. [Looting was] nothing personal. It’s just business. 39

That moral dimension comes to ‘rioters’ from the same source as it comes to the law-abiding. Barry reported: ‘I heard someone say “Let’s burn the bingo down” and I heard someone say “I can’t do that, my mam will kill me”’. 40

Another layer of motivations for the ‘mutiny’ of August 2011 needs to be examined if we are to fully comprehend why these events take place. One key cause is the absolute hatred for the police still felt by swathes of low-income urbanites. ‘It was total anger’, London youth worker Clasford Stirling told a journalist on 14th August, ‘the confrontation with police before looting happened. I’ve never seen the young people face to face with the police like that. When we met [London Mayor] Boris Johnson two months ago, people said to him, 'Look, if we don’t stop this thing between the kids and the police, it is going to kick off’’. 41 On this issue, Bauman is on shaky ground when he argues that this is not a rebellion by an oppressed ethnic minority. These events are a protest not by an ethnic minority, but by that minority which finds itself under constant scrutiny and unfair treatment – who, in short, is oppressed – by the police. Today, that minority is not simply marked by its African-Caribbean origins. But, in fact, the earlier protests were not exclusively composed of ethnic minorities. Close observers noted in the 1981 violent urban protests that white youths were involved in large numbers. In 1981, they took place in Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone, Cirencester and Fleetwood as well as the centres of black settlement, and, as we have seen, inner-city whites joined with blacks in battles with the police in 1981. 42 This time – it was evident in 2001 – British Asians joined with white and black British youth in seeking revenge for the mistreatment that had received at the hands of the police. A 17 year-old Muslim in full-time work in Tottenham said: ‘I hate the police. I don’t hate the policing system, I hate the police on the street. I hate them from the bottom of my heart’. Note his support for the ‘policing system’. Like the Rastafarians I talked with after the Bonfire Night Trial in 1975, this young man wants a judicious and fair system of law enforcement – yet again, this ‘rioter’ is not one who has lost his moral compass. We should pay attention to the calibration of this hatred – its embodiment, experienced as an annihilation of self: ‘I just come out of my yard and I’m chilling for you to come up and stop and search me. And violate me. Because that’s what it is, a violation, talking to me like I’m nothing’ said a 32 year-old black man from south London. 43 This is the same kind of testimony that Franz Fanon provided all those years ago, and, as he pointed out, the reply will be violent. A 34 year-old ‘rioter’ from north London said he’d been brutalized and called a ‘nigger’ by police when he was 12, and he had ‘never gotten over [his anger]’ since on three further occasions the police had arrested him and fabricated evidence. The everyday experience of policing is perceived as disrespectful and humiliating by a wide range of city dwellers:
They just generally treat you as someone that’s bad like that [...] It really irritates me because I’m not that kinda bad person, it’s just that I get frustrated at police thinking they can talk to you like you’re some, any other hoodlum, and you know, you’re stupid ... and talk to you like you’re a five-year-old [...] but I’m the police, so you have to listen to me.44

That report piled on the detail. A 20 year-old College student found a police car in Peckham, smashed its windows and set it on fire. ‘It felt good, that police car. It felt really good’. She said the police had broken her little brother’s nose. ‘They have no respect, especially for my mum, she’s just a little old woman. She’s always polite and stuff as well and they’re always rude to my mum – had no respect for any of us [...] I didn’t want to rob anything. It was just the police, that’s what I was totally against’. 85% of ‘rioters’ interviewed in this research said that ‘policing’ was a cause for their actions – and 68% of the general population thought so too.45

Revolutions have been described as ‘festivals of the oppressed’. Reflecting on the ‘riots’ in the Hyde Park area of Leeds in 1997 I quoted a wag who said that these were ‘carnivals of the depressed’. That was the mood then in Hyde Park, but that is not the message coming from the LSE research. Here the feeling is joyful, excited, euphoric. ‘Losing it’, but with pleasure running through, is implied when a 20 year old law student from London described ‘more than 200 hundred of us. Just going ballistic basically’. He was also lost to the forces of control that are exerted upon us all from birth to grave. He felt that he was ‘untouchable’. ‘It felt like it was on a leash for years and it felt like we’ve come off the leash’. The use of ‘it’ may be important here. It might signify that not only was ‘he’ on a leash ‘for years’ but the whole of the world as he experiences it has been locked down until that brief moment when he and his mates could do exactly as they liked. His target was familiar: ‘Fuck up the Feds’, ‘Because we all just hated the police’, ‘“Yeah you gonna get taught a fucking lesson now” because I’ve got so many friends that have got beaten up by police officers’. And then there was his particular delight in smashing up a car showroom, ‘and there was a couple of cars that got put on fire, I think it was a Lotus [...] I felt no one could actually, [sic...] I’m untouchable’.46

As these events were winding down, Guardian journalist John Harris went to the Midlands and engaged in an art that sociologists in general seem to have abandoned: he talked with and listened to people. His article is packed with insight, including facts such as the 33% youth unemployment rate in West Bromwich, where ‘the town centre has a pinched, sad ambience’. In Wolverhampton, 19 year old Tobias Bailey told him ‘This is a tough, broken down city [...] The police will pick out people, and bully and harass them’. In the ‘shabby environs’ of Sandwell shopping centre he talked to a group consisting of one white and five black teenage boys. ‘Contrary to stereotype, they were hardly feral: well turned-out and fairly polite’, with some mainstream opinions, such as ‘If you can’t beat your children, they’ll be naughty’. One of them gave an answer the Harris’s question ‘Why did people do it’ which strikes me as the best summary of what these events were about: ‘Free shit. And fucking the system’.47 Each word should be read with equal weight. ‘Free’: we got it for nothing, how good is that?; ‘shit’: well, it probably is of no real value, but still we long for it; ‘fucking’: is it pleasure? Is it pain?; ‘the system’: well, we’re not
sociologists, but we know it’s a system, run by them, not for us, and we’ll fuck it as painfully as we can. (Rastafarians called it ‘the shitstem’). This is the sense I want to give to the term ‘protest’ when I name these events ‘violent urban protest’: city people are violently breaking with ‘the system’, particularly with those agencies who use the most (symbolic, and actual) violence against them, and in an almost orgasmic sense of release, they just want to cause it pain. No manifesto, not even the one provided so eloquently by Bob Marley, still less the Jamesian political poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson, no hint of a better tomorrow – but no more subservience, no more passivity when ‘they’ try to reduce ‘us’ to nothing.

Conclusion

This article started in Leeds, so perhaps it should finish in Leeds. The official report noted that there was ‘disorder related crime’ in Leeds during the period that other cities were being burned. There was a deliberately set fire in Leeds but it had nothing to do with the events in other parts of England. It seems that the Leeds West Indian Carnival HQ in Chapeltown was set on fire because some cars had been smashed up outside a mosque in the same area.\(^\text{48}\) That description immediately conjures up the idea that Muslims and African-Caribbeans were going to war in Leeds, particularly when you know that an African Caribbean man was shot by a Muslim, who is now in custody, charged with murder. But this story could follow another script: groups of young men, perhaps not the most consistently law-abiding, move into confrontation when a cross-group sexual liaison gets underway. Men fighting over women is perhaps the oldest story we know. Within a couple of days, local people – mature people, with their long knowledge of protest, the burning of their shops, arrests, court cases, and community ‘self-help’ in Chapeltown and Harehills – organized a ‘peace march’. Combined with effective, and legitimate, additional policing, this activity stopped further disorder from taking place. If, in the incidents of violence against property and the person, some people ‘lost it’, others ‘found’, or, more accurately, re-mobilized their care and concern for the other, for the premises they frequent each day, and they had the moral authority in their neighbourhoods to overcome whatever tendencies there were among the most alienated young people to kick off as they had in other English cities. The youths of Chapeltown and Harehills, however, still have much to protest about.

Notes


2 Stokely Carmichael and Charles V Hamilton, Black Power: the Politics of Liberation in America (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1969). I wrote in Critical Social Policy about the most powerful expression of this tendency in Chapeltown, expressed in the strike it organized at a local school against the racism of the head-teacher and the mis-education of the black and the white youth at Cowper Street School. The article is available here
In these three cases, Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, official enquiries were launched, leading to three long reports. The report that tied all three together, known as the Cantle Report, introduced the terminology of ‘community cohesion’ into national policy. I wrote a long conference paper on these events which includes all the relevant references, concentrating on Harehills, Leeds, and introducing my preferred term ‘violent urban protest’ to replace ‘riot’. The paper, titled ‘The Northern ‘race riots’ of the summer of 2001 – were they riots, were they racial? A case-study of the events in Harehills, Leeds’ is available here <www.maxfarrar.org.uk/docs/HarehillsBSARace2May02.pdf> [14.12.2011].
21 Interview 20.03.2002
27 The interview was conducted by Fernando Duarte for the Portuguese publication *O Globo*, and reproduced by the web-journal Social Europe on 15th August 2011. It is available here <www.social-europe.eu/2011/08/interview-zygmunt-bauman-on-the-uk-riots/> [14.12.2011].
29 The prestigious Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development reported in 2011 that, since the 1970s, income inequality had risen faster in Britain than in any other rich country. The top 10% in this country earned about twelve times that of the bottom 10% in 2008. In countries such as Germany, Denmark and Sweden the ratio is around six to one. The income share of Britain’s 1% of top earners rose from 7.1% in 1970 to 14.3% in 2005. See Randeep Ramesh, ‘Income gap rising faster in UK than any other wealthy nation, says OECD’ *Guardian*, 6.12.2011 p.2. Available at <www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/dec/05/income-inequality-growing-faster-uk> [14.12.2011].
30 I am a sociologist by trade, but frequently despair of the discipline. However, an important analysis of the ‘riots’ by two sociologists, Karim Murji and Sarah Neal, appeared soon after the events were over. They pointed out that discursive responses were many and various, but even conservative politicians acknowledged that the
causes were complex. Unusually, they note the effect of ‘super-diversity’ in London meant the linkages between ‘race’ and ‘riot’ – the dominant theme of earlier phases of rioting in the UK – were much harder for commentators to comprehend. They point out that policing remains as important an issue in the 2011 events as it has been in the past. Karim Murji and Sarah Neal, ‘Riot: Race and Politics in the 2011 Disorders’, Sociological Research On-line, 16 (4) 24, November (2011), available here <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/4/24.html> [24.01.2012]

‘Reading the Riots’ <www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots> There was a time when sociologists would have done this empirical work – and a few excellent postgraduates did make an effort. Their interviews and observations were published here: <www.guardian.co.uk/society/series/behind-the-riots>. [23.01.2012]


Some information on these incidents is published here <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-14449656> [18.12.2011]

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Mellen) in 2002. In 2009 he was appointed Professor for Community Engagement, after running Leeds Met’s Community Partnerships and Volunteering Office but has since retired from institutional academic life. His recent work includes chapters on the genealogy of Islamism and the competing discourses of multiculturalism in ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’: Key issues in Multiculturalism (London: Palgrave, 2012, forthcoming). Much of his published work and some of his photography is downloadable from <www.maxfarrar.org.uk>. 