

# Reading the Riots – London 2011: Local Revolt and Global Protest

DICK BLACKWELL, Institute of Group Analysis, UK

**ABSTRACT** *The riots in UK cities in 2011 can be understood from a Group Analytic perspective as communications in a complex social context. This context includes a long history of deprivation, oppression, colonialism and racism globally and locally, the post 1989 global domination by the neo-liberal economic doctrine imposed locally through “austerity”, the violence of the global dominance of the “West” manifested in the “war on terror”, and the spirit of protest manifested in the “Arab Spring” and in the Occupy movement.* Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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According to a dialectical proposition it is the whole which determines the truth – not in the sense that the whole is prior or superior to its parts, but in the sense that its structure and function determine every particular condition and relation. (Herbert Marcuse, 1965, p. 2)

## BACKGROUND

In August 2011 the UK was apparently surprised and shaken by an outbreak of rioting that began in London and subsequently spread to other parts of the country.

My perspective on these riots is based on three positions. The first is that I was a researcher on an action research project – Black Youth in the Inner City – in the 1970s. The second is that of a psychotherapist consulting over the last five years to organisations working with variously homeless, disadvantaged, and disaffected young people in inner-city London. The third is my theoretical perspective as a group analyst.

I am not attempting to diagnose the causes of the riots, nor to provide any sort of comprehensive explanation as to why and how they occurred. They are, I think, overdetermined. In the words of musician Tinchy Snyder (Lamont, 2012):

There’s loads of different reasons why they acted like they acted. A lot of people done it because they were young, and if everyone’s going to [loot] the shop you just run in too, only really thinking for the moment. And other people thought they had to do it, ’cos it was their chance. [They were thinking:] “No one does nothing for us, and the police always harass us, and now it’s our chance to do this or that.”

Correspondence to: Dick Blackwell, Institute of Group Analysis, 1 Daleham Gardens, London NW3 5BY, UK.  
E-mail: rich.phill.4@virgin.net

I am aiming instead to develop a view of the riots through a particular psychotherapeutic lens concerned with making human behaviour intelligible. I do not set out to explain the group dynamics or individual psychodynamics of the participants. Nor do I see it as the role of psychotherapy's engagement with politics to provide psychotherapeutic analyses of social problems and advice to governments on how to respond to, or address the causes of such problems. Governments within the current global context tend to have other priorities, and all forms of psychotherapy are also permeated and constrained by political and social forces. We operate necessarily from within the system that we seek to understand, where most change is still generated from above, and seldom as the result of the sort of reflexive critique, analysis, and interpretation we might prefer.

I view the riots as unsurprising. It is in many ways a less significant question to ask why the riots happened than to ask why anyone was surprised by their occurrence, or why they do not happen more often.

It is also important to make clear that while my original research focused on "black youth", I do not regard the recent riots as specifically a "race" issue, but rather a response of a disadvantaged community (to which the term underclass might be applied) and assorted others responding to a particular context of oppression. However, it remains true that "race" and racism play a significant part in determining and maintaining the composition of the "underclass" and in the relations between the police and the black community.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Group analysis was begun by S. H. Foulkes as a form of psychotherapy that perceives the individual and the group from both psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives (Foulkes, 1948). Symptoms were to be understood as inarticulate communications. A similar view was developed in the 1970s in the field of family therapy based on research conducted by Gregory Bateson and his team 20 years earlier that produced the double bind theory (Bateson, 1956). Symptoms were understood as communications (intelligible within the context of the family communication system) which could be replaced by more articulate and therefore understandable communications developed within family or group psychotherapy. At the group level, "symptomatic" behaviour in a psychotherapy group, such as irregular attendance or persistent squabbling, was regarded as an inarticulate communication of deeper unconscious issues in the shared or "social" unconscious of the group. Moreover, individual contributions in a therapy group were also statements for and about the group, and were communications on behalf of the group unconscious. Lionel Stapley (2006), from the group relations tradition, has taken this way of thinking to the level of group/subgroup behaviour, perceiving the behaviour of large groups of people usually called "terrorists" as communications about the traumatic impact of globalisation on a much wider constituency of people on whose behalf the "terrorists" are communicating.

Foulkes insisted that individuals are permeated by social forces and therefore shaped by the social contexts in which they live. Each individual exists within a communicational matrix which has both conscious and unconscious dimensions. This formulation was influenced by the sociologist Norbert Elias, who compared it to his own concept of "figurations" (1978).

According to these theories, a social unconscious develops in social contexts, which means that actors are not necessarily conscious of the social forces shaping their actions and the social meanings they may be communicating. This is the unconscious dimension of the "matrix". Events within these contexts can be said to "resonate" within the matrix as unconscious communications.

Group analytic writers Dalal (2001), Hopper (2003), Weinberg (2007), and Hopper and Weinberg (2011) have developed the idea of a social unconscious in different ways, ranging from the unconscious internalisation of social arrangements, norms and values by the individual to a recognition of the collective unconsciousness of those arrangements. They have proposed various features of those arrangements including power structures and historical traumas and their sequelae. They have also suggested various collective unconscious defence mechanisms, mostly specifically social defences rather than those characteristic of the Freudian psychoanalytic discourse. Weinberg (2007), however, used the Freudian term “disavowel”, insisting that it must by its nature be a “social” defence against annihilation anxiety. I propose that where any unconscious process or defence such as repression or projection is being shared by a number of people in a social context, it can be thought of as part of a “social unconscious”.

I am therefore proposing a perspective of the London riots that views them as significant communications, intelligible within the various contexts within which they can be located, and influenced by the social unconscious processes of those contexts.

A number of contexts are relevant when considering these riots. Most importantly, we need to recognise the global context within which the other contexts exist and function. Over the last four decades, we have seen a significant change in the global socio-economic structure. In the early post-empire, post-colonial world, we could talk of an affluent Western world and a relatively poor “third world”. Increasingly, we have seen this division manifested not so much between countries but within countries. “Third world” countries develop their own super-rich class, while in the so-called “developed” world we find increasing levels of poverty and destitution, and an underclass that could be said to be the “third world within”.

This trend has considerable significance for social “hope”. Yalom (1970) identified the “instillation of hope” as the first of the “therapeutic factors” in group therapy. Hopper (2003) also wrote about the importance of hope, which he describes as the “capacity and willingness to exercise the transcendent imagination within the context of the traumatogenic process” (p. 203). A priest I encountered in the inner city during my research 40 years ago told me that a major part of his role in the community was to give people hope. “Hope,” he said, “is a theological concept.” By this he did not mean that he comforted people with promises of an afterlife, but that within the communities he worked in he tried to keep alive a hope that what the people did had some point, some purpose, and some significant meaning.

## **THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE INNER CITY (1970s)**

In 1973 I started work as a researcher with the National Association of Youth Clubs’ (NAYC) Multiracial Youth-Work Project which began with the idea that race relations could be improved if young people of different races could mix together in youth clubs. It belonged philosophically to a belief system that saw youth clubs as a valuable alternative to young people hanging out on street corners and getting into trouble. NAYC, to its credit, was also trying to make youth clubs sites for some social and political education, as well as for table tennis, football, discos, and romance.

But, in the early 1970s, divisions between black and white youth were already sufficiently sharp for most youth clubs to perceive a problem in trying to maintain a balance of black and white members. The trend, allegedly, was that as soon as more than a third of a club’s members were black, the whites started to drift away and in next to no time it was a black club with only a smattering of white members.

However, it rapidly became apparent that having a mixed membership was not the primary issue. The demands and needs of black youth (see below) demanded a very different, more flexible, and ultimately more political response from the youth service. The project was hastily re-designated Black Youth in the Inner City, in recognition that the problem was not simply the relations between black youth and white youth, but something more basic to the structure and culture of the whole society with regard to racism and class.

Despite all being working class, these black young people identified themselves primarily as being black. Colour was the only thing that defined them and the only thing that mattered. The legacy of colonialism, as it had re-emerged in post-war Britain faced with economic migration from the colonies, had long since set them apart from their working class white peers. As one black youth said to me, “We don’t have nothing to do with them, except they come to us for drugs and we go to them for guns.” Their primary experience of life in British society – the defining experience – was of racism and the denigration of blackness.

We identified four problem areas at that time: schools, where black youth felt alienated, discriminated against, tended to be unsuccessful, get into trouble, and generally have their perceptions of the dice being loaded against them confirmed; employment, where they felt their colour either guaranteed them a lowly, badly paid and boring job or no job at all; home and accommodation, where clashes with parents around expectations and discipline often led to their becoming homeless; and relationships with the police, by whom they felt persistently discriminated against, harassed, and persecuted.

During the two years I worked on the project, it should have been clear there was a powder keg waiting to blow, though I am not sure how clearly we realised it at the time. I left partly because I wanted to train as a psychotherapist but also because there was a real problem about having a white guy in any kind of leadership role in what needed to be a black project. A sustaining political consciousness amongst many of the black young people was based on ideas of black power with Malcolm X seen as a leader and an inspiration. I suppose my failure to perceive the powder keg was partly a belief and hope that the black youth would find a way of putting their anger into community politics.

Less than a decade later, at the beginning of the 1980s, it all kicked off. A confrontation with the police (one incident too far) provoked a riot in Brixton, one of the areas in which I’d worked; and as the rioting spread to other parts of the country, I ticked off the list most of the other areas I’d visited: Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, etc. There followed an official inquiry under the chairmanship of a judge, Lord Scarman, which produced the sort of banalities that official inquiries frequently produce. (Why, incidentally, is it so often a judge who becomes the head of what might be thought to be a social scientific task?) The police were both blamed and exonerated, and the term “institutional racism” was launched into circulation, despite the rejection by Scarman of the idea that the police were institutionally racist. Another decade later, after the murder of a black youth by a gang of young whites and the failure of the police to handle the situation appropriately, it was established in another inquiry that the police probably *were* institutionally racist. This may have had something to do with increased familiarity with the term “institutional racism” and with what it might denote.

## THE WIDER POLITICAL/HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By then we were well into the Thatcher years and what can now be seen clearly to be the beginnings of a cultural revolution we are still living through. She said in 1981, “Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul” (Butt, 1981). (This was classic Marxism used against all the forces

of the left.) First, alternative lifestyles had to be attacked, so there was a concerted attack on those who lived at the margins of society, whether they were harmless hippies travelling from one rock festival to another or the unemployed who had found a way to survive without work in their own localities. No one was to be allowed to live outside the system. As Bob Dylan (1966) wrote, “To live outside the law you must be honest”, and that sort of honesty could be a real threat to the efficacy of the propaganda and mystification to which the population was to be increasingly subjected. Moreover, those living outside the system are in a position to take up critical positions which are less easy to sustain from within it. The unions too had to be crushed because opposition from within the system proposing alternative ways of running things was even more of a threat than alternative lifestyles outside the system. First, Thatcher refused to talk to them, then she mobilised the police as a political army to fight the miners’ strike. The end of the miners’ strike seemed to mark the end of trade unionism as a major political force and a focus for organised resistance.

Thatcher went on to mesmerize a large proportion of the population, convincing them simultaneously that there was no such thing as a free lunch and that they could have roads, railways, an education system, and a health service, not to mention an army to fight the occasional war, while paying fewer taxes. It was the beginning of a takeover of the language and a domination of the political discourse that remains with us today. Culturally it takes the form of increasingly meaningless corporate management speak and an obsession with competition, cost cutting, and the reduction of everything to monetary terms or, at least, to quantifiable terms. In the therapy world we are now under increasing pressure, within both the NHS and the not-for-profit sectors, to provide simplistic “evidence” to “prove” simplistic “outcomes” in extraordinarily complicated human interactions.

The Labour Party of the 1970s and ‘80s split, wilted, and almost folded, returning in new modernized form, although “Thatcherised form” might be more accurate, to claim power with an agenda that had only echoes of the purposes of the original Labour Party. This was essentially a post-Thatcher agenda. The need for neo-liberal economics was no longer questioned; it was just a case of who was to manage the neo-liberal economy.

Globally, hope had dwindled too. The fall of the Allende regime in Chile was perhaps the first domino in the US-inspired movement to terminate socialist experiments and replace them with experiments in neo-liberal economics. Argentina and other parts of Latin America followed. The IMF’s structural adjustment programme (SAP) imposed the neo-liberal model on all parts of the third world, seeking to borrow money for economic development. “Sap” is exactly what it did to the hopes of third world countries trying to achieve democratic, egalitarian social systems. Another socialist experiment in Nicaragua, which began with great early successes in healthcare, education, and freedom from tyranny and torture, was systematically targeted and terrorized to destruction.

The global development of neo-liberal capitalism over the last 40 years, with its concomitant violence and coercion, increasingly large gaps developing between rich and poor, and the development of a super-rich class at one end of society and an increasingly impoverished underclass at the other, has been well chronicled by Klein (2007). Chomsky (1988, 1991, 1993, 2003) and Blum (2003) have painted similar pictures, highlighting the violence involved in the creation and maintenance of the economic order and the destruction of hope for any viable alternative. Blum’s title for his study of US efforts to control and manage much of the world, “Killing hope: US military and CIA interventions since World War II”, sums up the enterprise succinctly. The doctrine that after the break-up of the Soviet Empire we had reached the “end of history” or the “end of ideology” emphasised the message that there was no longer any alternative source of hope for a different sort of society.

## THE EROSION OF HOPE IN THE INNER CITY

John Rex (1973) showed the connection between colonialism and the situation of former colonial subjects living in Britain's inner cities. Now that, 40 years later, these inner-city communities are subjects of a post-colonial, global economic empire which maintains an exploitative relationship between rich and poor, coloniser and colonised, we should expect to find a resonance between the lack of hope imposed on former colonies and the situation in British inner cities.

Half a century ago the "third world" was a geographical area where the populations were generally poor, while the "developed" world was a geographical area where the populations were relatively rich. Although there were structural divisions within societies, there was a substantial division (the rich world and the poor world) based on geography and the relationship between states. Increasingly, this is changing to a situation where each society has a similar division between rich and poor such that we can begin to talk of a "third world" emerging within the so called-affluent societies of the West.

In the inner cities of the UK hope has indeed dwindled. Black politics and its aspirations seem to have been replaced by gangs, gangsterism, petty crime, and basic survival strategies. Many black youths now reportedly belong to gangs because it is the only safe option. As an isolated individual, you have no chance. The "gangsta" seems to have acquired a sort of heroic status to be admired and aspired to. Alternatives for the most part offer only individual trajectories. There may be possibilities of becoming a successful athlete, artist, or musician for those who have those talents, or one may be fortunate enough to do well in the education system and pursue economic advancement and conventional social status, or one may even become a social or youth worker. But there will be only a limited number for whom these courses are realistic possibilities. There is little to offer *collective* hope to those living in deprived and oppressed communities. The historian Tony Judt (Pilkington, 2010) observed shortly before he died that we have now produced two generations who have no conception or vision of a better or different society or community; they can envisage only personal success and advancement. This has different impacts at different levels of society. For the affluent and the middle classes, it produces the sort of alienation to which many have been long subjected and to which they have developed their own ways of coping, for example, through professional success and individual advancement and promotion of their class interests. For the working class and its various elements, the consequences are more far-reaching. The sort of solidarity based on collective labour in the manufacturing industry has suffered with the decline of manufacturing and the decline of the unions. For those forced into low-pay employment or unemployment, survival strategies increasingly take over and the level of alienation from mainstream society grows.

Meanwhile, for young Muslims, there is always political Islam; the successor to Arab Nationalism and other forms of collective hope in the Third World, it now offers in the British city at least a rhetoric of opposition to domestic racism and to the international enterprises of the UK government and the globalisation project to which it contributes, along with a sense of international or transnational solidarity.

In each of the problem areas identified by my NAYC research project in the 1970s the situation has deteriorated. Unemployment has been almost consistently on the increase over the last three decades. The cuts and austerity economic package of 2011 seem guaranteed to make the situation worse. Nor does the level of discrimination against poor, non-white job seekers seem to have changed significantly, despite the rhetoric of equal opportunities which seems to have left the core of the problem largely untouched.

Education, for all its problems, once offered some limited hope as long as it remained possible to operationalise some radical educational ideas such as Freire's (1968) pedagogy of the oppressed, addressing directly the lived experience of pupils in an oppressive social system, introducing subjects like black history, and teaching those subjects in a way designed to bring them to life for the students. The imposition of a national curriculum and its preoccupation with testing and passing exams has relegated education to the status of an obstacle course designed to instil social conformity and the illusion that every question has a right answer. Successful completion of a course improves individual opportunities for further qualification and a "good job". It also enhances the school's status in a competitive league table. Learning for the sake of learning, or to engage with important questions about identity, life, society, meaning, and history (the main themes of teacher training and progressive educational philosophy 40 years ago), is distinctly passé. The hope that education now offers is distinctly limited and circumscribed by the market.

In systems of substantial inequality and oppression, the relationship between those most disadvantaged and oppressed and the police is always likely to be problematic. A group of young people recently invited to view a new movie about their community confirmed its realism in most aspects, except that after watching only a short sequence of young men hanging out on a street corner they said that could never happen without the "feds" showing up to hassle them.

In my view, the problem is not just one of police attitudes, or even culture. The so-called "canteen culture" of the police, where prejudices allegedly continue to flourish despite official attempts to formally address the problem of institutional racism, may be part of the problem but it is hardly the root cause. The deeper problem is structural and shaped by the demands on police to manage and contain social deprivation and discontent, and the extent to which they are not so much creators of their own culture but carriers and communicators of the wider culture to which they themselves are subject. In recent years the much publicised shooting by security police of an unarmed and entirely innocent citizen, Jean Charles de Menezes, has shown how dangerously out of control policing can become when placed under acute political pressure within a context of collective anxiety. Such incidents remain in the popular consciousness or social unconscious of much of society, as do the clashes and confrontations between police and protestors of late 2010, when a substantial number of school children protesting peacefully about education cuts were effectively imprisoned by police on a bridge over the river Thames for many hours in freezing and dangerously overcrowded conditions. Add to that the deaths of black men in custody, and the increase in routine searches of non-white people, encouraged both by concerns about knife crime and legislation designed to prevent terrorism, and a single flashpoint is all that is needed for pent-up feelings to erupt.

Family structures in the inner city seem to have changed since the 1970s, with an increase in single-parent families and more children in care. The continuance of exploitation and oppression of these communities (along with, in some cases, the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and migration) has produced increasingly casual and fragmented patterns of relationship in which immediate pleasure and gratification become the only option in the absence of any hope or faith in a future. Children increasingly grow up in fragmented and chaotic families or in a care system with its own brand of chaos which can readily compete with the most problematic natural family. At the same time, a housing shortage continues, with rising prices putting decent accommodation beyond the reach of many young people, including those from relatively affluent backgrounds.

In fact, very little has improved for these inner-city communities in the last 35 years, and most things have deteriorated. Most significant is the decline in possibilities for hope, whether it is hope in personal relationships or collective hope for a strong community and a better way of living

together. Political hope has effectively vanished. There seems to be a notable lack of community organisations with any political agenda. Organisations that provide therapeutic or social care interventions try to help individuals to transform their own individual lives but they offer no collective vision. In addition, there is no structure for the channelling dissent.

Three years ago, I discussed with a community worker the evolution of community work since its early popularity in the 1970s. She said that when she began her career the idea was to help members of a community to work out, articulate, and pursue their own agenda. Now it was her job to include and involve them in a pre-established local authority or government agenda. The politics of assertion, independence, autonomy, and self-reliance have been replaced by the politics of “inclusion”; or, perhaps more precisely, the management of inclusion. This is another move towards the comprehensive management of society at every level: what Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) called, “total administration”.

Around the same time, I mentioned to a black community worker that many of the young black people I had encountered during my research in the 1970s seemed inspired by Malcolm X. He thought for a moment, before sighing, “Malcolm X; I haven’t heard him mentioned in over 10 years.”

Total administration, with its emphasis not just on management of people but with the management of meaning and the definition of what constitutes “reality”, has become a principal mode of domination and oppression in contemporary Western society, particularly in the UK. Gramsci (1973) described the workings of “hegemony” whereby the values and norms of the ruling elite permeate downwards through all levels of society. Foucault (1980) took this idea further through his recognition of the ways in which structures of power and domination are embodied in what is regarded as knowledge. Marcuse (1964) took Adorno’s idea of total administration further with his analysis of a culture designed to produce a one-dimensional man whose thinking and capacity for critical thought were shaped, guided, and ultimately blunted. Marcuse’s (1965) term, “repressive tolerance”, remains a perceptive description of the political culture that says in effect, you can have “free speech”, you can have demonstrations, and you can have votes and political parties, because we can make sure that none of it makes any difference.

The imposition of “one dimensionality” has a particular impact in poor and deprived communities. Back in the 1970s the idea was aired within “urban sociology” that inner cities might be looked at in terms of what Goffman (1961) called “total institutions”. This idea was aired in conversations at the time and, as I recall, attributed to Ray Pahl. The inhabitants’ lives could be seen as being so deprived of choice and opportunities for initiative within the conventional or official channels that, like the inmates of asylums studied by Goffman, they could be seen to be developing an “underlife” of covert and illegal activities as the only way left to them to express their human freedom.

## THE RIOTS AS COMMUNICATIONS

In this context, it is unsurprising that rioting should occur. The riot, as Martin Luther King once noted, is the voice of the unheard. And a large section of UK society has been increasingly unheard for three or four decades. We might reasonably ask why there have not been more riots, and we might speculate that it has become so unfashionable to act collectively or to perceive a common cause or purpose for collective rebellion that only a particular combination of circumstances is now capable of provoking such action.

The flashpoint was again a clash with the police following the shooting of a young black man in North London in circumstances that quickly became hotly disputed, as conflicting reports about



whether he was armed or not circulated. It arose, however, in the context of recent economic attacks on various sections of the community, with a systematic attempt to stigmatise recipients of state welfare who were poor, while state welfare in a different form was readily available to bail out the banking and financial speculation industry. These policies are, of course, rooted in and dictated by neo-liberal economic orthodoxy.

As they developed, the riots took on two themes. One was conflict with the police; the other was looting. The former simply enacted the day-to-day conflicts and tensions between these communities and the police. The other enacted both the economic disadvantage and deprivation experienced by many of the rioters and their communities, taking the goods they could not afford to buy, and at a symbolic level the oppressed spoke back in the language of their oppression; the rebels rebelled on the only terms they felt were left to them by the system against which they were rebelling.

The sociologist Sigmund Bauman (2011) suggested that the looting of consumer goods implies an acceptance of mainstream values, seeing shopping as the recipe for a good life. The riots are therefore best understood as a revolt of frustrated consumers. This appears to echo Robert Merton's (1957) theory of crime in which the criminal has accepted society's norms in terms of goals but has deviated in terms of what is regarded as legitimate or acceptable means to achieve them, having been denied access to those "legitimate" channels. However, another sociologist, Max Farrar (2012), argued that the riots should be properly described as "violent urban protests" against systematic exploitation, oppression and abuse. In an earlier article discussing the articulation of protest (a legitimate democratic activity) in the form of violence (the legitimacy of which is necessarily questionable), Farrar (2009) drew on Fanon's analysis of violence in the colonial context, thereby implicitly linking the violent urban protests in the UK with those of oppressed colonial subjects.

For some observers the riots could not be seen as political because they had no political agenda, no manifesto, no political demands, and no political rhetoric; they represented only wanton greed and destructiveness. Such analyses, however, ignore the degree of wanton greed and destructiveness already embedded in the social system and they ignore the extent to which these populations, and perhaps the wider population and the wider cultural discourse, are deprived of the tools, i.e. the theoretical frameworks and language of political analysis and the organisations to articulate political visions and agendas, through which they might articulate their discontent and their aspirations. Indeed, their lack of collective visions and aspirations is an example of what they have been denied.

Trapped at the bottom of an administrative system that values only individual economic success, constrained and often oppressed by the police, the rioters rebelled against the control of their lives by that administrative system and against the distribution of goods which, due to that system, leaves them always at a disadvantage. In that moment they had the power to confront the system in its own terms, claiming as their own the consumer goods to which they normally have such limited access, and fighting back violently against the order of that system and those who impose it.

Matza and Sykes (1961) introduced into the sociology of deviance the concept of "subterranean values". These were the values of mainstream society that coexisted (often in contradiction) with other mainstream values and took precedence in "deviant" and criminal behaviour. Thus one might say the violent appropriation of resources (in colonialism and imperialism) are subterranean values of mainstream Western "democracies". I want to extend that line of thinking to a

recognition of the subterranean contents of the social unconscious which similarly exist beneath and in contradiction to officially proclaimed mainstream values. That is, those elements of social life embodied in the social structure and process which produce the violence of exploitation and deprivation: the unconscious destructiveness and sadism expressed in the implementation of “cuts” and “austerity”, and denied and disavowed through the rationalisation of economic necessity; the contempt for the “underclass” and indifference to their suffering; the deviousness and dishonesty projected into welfare claimants and alleged “bogus asylum seekers”; the negation of the existence of these people whereby they are both invisible and maintained as a reservoir of cheap labour; and the violence and vengefulness emerging in the punitive legal remedies meted out to “rioters”. Considered in this way, the riots can be read as a “return of the repressed”.

## THE WIDER CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Within the social unconscious, events resonate communicatively. Whether they are consciously perceived in any particular way may be less relevant than the way they are unconsciously perceived and reacted to – that is the *way* in which they resonate. Resonance occurs at all levels of context: local, national, and global. It is therefore important to consider these riots in a wider context of recent political developments and, while it is difficult to assess the influence or precise resonance of these developments, it is not difficult to discern common themes and connections.

In the UK the economic crisis and the government’s choice of “austerity” and cuts has clearly exacerbated the level of deprivation amongst those already most deprived. This has not only increased economic hardship but also fuelled existing anger and alienation, so the riots drew in many who were not so much themselves victims of the economic situation but angry and disillusioned with the whole system.

The Arab Spring gave a vivid demonstration of how people could collectively rebel against their rulers, protest against injustice, and become embroiled in confrontations with the uniformed defenders of the system. While the obvious injustices and repressive violence of the Arab regimes appear far removed from the more permissive and tolerant society in the UK, the despair and outrage experienced by the underclass and increasingly by lower levels of the old working class may not be so markedly different.

The “war against terror” since 2001 has not only increased hostility and suspicion towards Muslim communities in the UK, but also has demonstrated the violence of the “West” against third world peoples, particularly Muslim people, with whom oppressed inner-city dwellers in the UK might readily identify, especially as it has been carried out with impunity and strident, if unconvincing, moral justification.

Earlier in 2011 the “war against terror” had taken a new turn when Barack Obama, of whom so much had been expected and who had been the carrier of so much hope, dispatched what was effectively a death squad to kill Osama Bin Laden. It was difficult not to conclude that Bin Laden could have been relatively easily captured and brought to trial. So it appeared that Obama too had fallen from the pinnacle of expectation and hope into the abyss of traditional US foreign policy of which he had promised at least some reform. This was not just the act of a “liberal” US president but of a liberal *black* US president who might have been expected to bring more restraint and balance to bear to a situation in which the developed, predominantly “white” world habitually disposes of colonised “black” lives. Moreover, it sent a message that in the new globalised world, anything goes; that accepted and generally agreed standards of democratic politics and political

discourse no longer imposed any limits. Even if those standards were frequently violated or bypassed, they previously served as a baseline for argument and criticism, and for evaluating the moral status of an action. With the assassination of Bin Laden those standards were officially put in abeyance, if not permanently set aside.

Only a month or two after the riots the “Occupy” movement developed internationally, and a camp was set up in London in the precinct of St Paul’s Cathedral. This was non-violent civil disobedience, but it was disobedience nevertheless. Moreover, it was articulate in its critique of the global economy and in its demands. A subsequent event may not be a cause or contributory factor to a prior event, but its recognition serves to illustrate the sense of a wider social movement of discontent, protest and rebellion of which the riots can be seen as part.

## THE POPULAR AND OFFICIAL RESPONSES

The popular response is in some ways difficult to determine since so much of it is engineered by the media. Much media coverage has stayed close to the official political line. It would appear to be dangerous to go anywhere near a view that regarded the riots as more or less inevitable in the circumstances. Suggestions that the current government and its policies may have been a contributory factor are possible, but any recognition of the deeper problems would implicate successive governments over three decades and, to some extent, also implicate a population that has been largely content to allow society to take the course it has.

The response has therefore been primarily to condemn mindless violence and destruction, and to highlight some standard scapegoats: family structures, especially absent fathers; lack of male role models; absence of “good authority figures”; and absent, negligent, working, or over-worked mothers. Then there is the education system which is blamed for not equipping young people with sufficient skills to qualify them for increasingly scarce or non-existent jobs. It is a familiar scenario, not only of a blame culture, but of an insistence that the problem lies within the communities themselves and that it can be solved through social engineering without seriously questioning the system that creates these communities.

The media dutifully focused on the most tragic events involving loss of life and the damage and destruction inflicted on small businesses that were actually part of the communities, playing down the targeting of chain stores and other corporate interests. They thereby highlighted the most destructive and politically and economically counter-productive aspects of the rioters’ behaviour, depriving it of any coherence or intelligibility. Moreover, in highlighting these personal tragedies, the moral reprehensibility of the perpetrators is emphasised, thereby marginalising them from ordinary, decent people and consigning them to a moral (or immoral) ghetto where they are unlikely to be the recipients of much empathy or any attempt to perceive any legitimacy in their grievances.

The courts have played their part by handing down heavy sentences not only to rioters, but also to would-be rioters who were simply advertising their intention to riot, and to those clearly caught up in in group processes to which they gave little thought and, in the course of which, they did little damage. It would appear that the intention has been to enact a social demand for punishment and/or revenge, and to deter any recurrence in the near future. Again, the identified perpetrators are isolated, blamed, and punished. The inherent violence and oppression of the system to which they are subject is obfuscated. The rioters’ communication, therefore, remains unheard.

A survey of rioters published by *The Guardian* newspaper (Lewis, Newburn, Taylor, & Ball, 2011) restored some balance in revealing the extent of the pre-existing tensions between rioters

and police, and questioning some of the more simplistic initial explanations put forward. However, it still provided a somewhat limited view of the socio-political context in terms of the history of the communities and their position in the global, post-colonial, post-Iron Curtain political economy.

## ARE THE RIOTS POLITICALLY SIGNIFICANT?

What also remains relatively undiscussed is what might be the real significance of the riots for the political establishment and the management and administration of the UK's political economy. Is the problem one of large-scale theft? Presumably not. Large-scale theft is commonplace especially through tax avoidance by the super-rich. Is it destruction of property or small businesses? Again, presumably not, given the damage inflicted in that sector by government economic policy. Is it a widespread outbreak of lawlessness? Here we may be getting closer because lawlessness needs to be confined to a relatively small number of people in order to ensure that the majority remain law abiding. So here we enter a problematic area of dialectic between the individual and the group. As a society we need laws – rules of fairness to regulate power relationships. But when those rules regulate power relationships unfairly, to what extent do we still need the rules to provide even a minimum degree of fairness and justice, and to what extent do we become constrained by them and administered into conformity with the system of unfairness? And within the current system of economic management, cuts to services, maintenance of the gap between rich and poor, etc., how much non-cooperation would it take to threaten the administrative system? And what if others outside the inner-city communities – psychotherapists for example – were to refuse to cooperate?

There is a significant amount of lawlessness in these inner-city communities and there has been for a long time. But the riots were a refusal to confine that lawlessness within its prescribed limits. They were a violent refusal to be administered, controlled, and kept in a socially allocated place. They were, in effect, acts of defiance. It is that defiance that the system cannot tolerate and it is for that reason primarily that it must be heavily punished and explained away. The explaining away becomes vitally important in ensuring the voice of the unheard is not recognised or listened to. But it is also important to wonder whether, in conforming to the demands of our work and our professional identities, we collude with an oppressive system at the same time as we protest against it and oppose it.

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**Dick Blackwell** is a Group Analyst, Family Therapist and Organisation Consultant; Associate Editor of *Group Analysis*; Consultant Group and Family Therapist to Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile. He graduated in Business Management, studied Physical Education, Urban Sociology and Youth and Community Work before training in Group Analysis and Family Therapy. He has specialized in suicide, psychosis and work with victims of torture and political violence and worked for over twenty years at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. He was Founder and Director of the Centre for Psychotherapy and Human Rights ([www.cphr.org.uk](http://www.cphr.org.uk)); author of *Counselling and Psychotherapy with Refugees* (Jessica Kingsley, 2005); co-author of *Far From the Battle but still at War: Troubled Refugee Children in Schools* (Medical Foundation, 2000); and has written extensively on psychotherapy culture and politics. He is a former 1960s “student power” activist and a contributor to the “Occupy” movement.