

## THE LANGUAGE OF PROTEST IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN POLITICAL ECONOMY: THE CASE OF THE LONDON RIOTS (2011)

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### Introduction

Riots such as the one in London 2011, are not merely some random isolated instances of vandalism, looting or unrest. Rather, riots like these are an effective manifestation of protest against the contemporary European political and economic system. The London riots sought to express the psychological, economic, financial and political grievances faced by individual protestors from various socio-economic strata of the UK. The objective is to remove the misconceptions (and the popular view) that the recent rising instances of protests in Europe are targeted at particular policies of certain governments where such unrest takes place. Instead, it is argued that these protests highlight a wider range of social issues and are intricately linked to the themes of consumerism, capitalism, urban governance, and effects of globalization, particularly in the UK. Hence, in an overarching comparative view, these riots are to be seen as a part of the global social movements.

Despite a wide ranging debate on the causes and issues, the London riots of 2011 are not a phenomenon to be attributed to a single cause or agenda. As Briggs (2012) notes, "the initial reasons for the unrest were not necessarily the same when it unfolded – people were in it for different reasons".<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that these interpretations are not mutually exclusive; rather they need to be looked at collectively.

The paper is divided into two sections: the first part will summarize the main findings and causes identified by three major reports, by *Guardian* (2011)<sup>2</sup>, NatCen (2011)<sup>3</sup> and Briggs (2012)<sup>4</sup>. The causes highlighted are

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Briggs, "Frustrations, Urban Relations and Temptations: Contextualising the Social Disorder in London", in Daniel Briggs (ed.), *In the English Riots of 2011: A Summer of Discontent* (Hampshire: Westerside Publications, 2012), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Lewis, *Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder* (London: The Guardian, 2011).

categorized as situational nudge factors, which surrounded the actual rioting incident. This part will bring to light some of the factual evidence and statistics collected by national agencies and first-hand accounts of those involved in the riot-related research.

The second section will evaluate and challenge the arguments and assumptions, listed in the first part. The London riots will be analyzed through different perspectives. The main themes to be assessed will be consumerism, capitalism, urban governance, and the effects of globalization on the UK, as well as an overarching comparative view of these riots in the light of global social movements. This part will theorize the nature of social movements in a broader urban European context.

### **Immediate causes and explanations**

The riots were sparked by the shooting of Duggan, which caused widespread anger against the authorities. A peaceful protest held outside the police station, urging the police to explain the suspicious circumstances surrounding his death, soon became violent after the police mishandled a teenage girl. The protest then turned into rioting. This spilled over into many parts of London.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, could not offer an appropriate comment on the situation. He described the incidents as: ‘criminality, pure and simple’.<sup>5</sup>

Lack of confidence in the police system thus appears to be at the core of this issue. Apart from the alleged mishandling of Duggan, several other aspects of the police role came under question. The police itself, was seen by the people to be operating as a gang because of its history of unjustifiable actions such as discriminatory treatment of blacks.<sup>6</sup> A general sense of dissatisfaction with police was seen by more than 85% of those interviewed by *Guardian* and a London School of Economics Project in

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<sup>3</sup> Gareth Morrell and Sara Scott, *The August Riots in England: Understanding the Involvement of Young People* (London: National Centre for Social Research, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Briggs (ed.), *In the English Riots of 2011*, 27-42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, vii, 27 and 133.

<sup>6</sup> Keelan Baldersan, “England Riots: Pure Criminality? Or Perfect Storm of Social Injustice?” *Wide Sheet* (10 August 2011), visit at <http://widesheet.co.uk/England-riots-pure-criminality-or-perfect-storm-of-social-injustice/>.

December 2011 as a 'very important' factor that provoked the riots.<sup>7</sup> The discriminatory methods adopted by the police such as stop and search were seen as demonstrating racial bias, for more blacks were being targeted and that too in a discourteous manner. Moreover, police was unable to control the protests and was a silent spectator, until these turned into full-fledged riots, and got out of hand.<sup>8</sup> Dissatisfaction with the police highlights not only its failure as an institution and the corruption that has crept in, but also, the larger structural issues, such as neglect on the part of governmental authorities. One notable reason cited for the riots was intense hatred for the authorities owing to lack of an appropriate response from them.<sup>9</sup>

It may be tempting to think of the issues with regard to policing solely from an ethnic/racial perspective. The Broadwater Farm rioting of 1981 and the skirmishes of the blacks with police, were often cited as being part of the troubled history of the British police's attitude towards the blacks. The predominance of the blacks (estimated at 48%) in rioting may also suggest the same, but pinpointing racial prejudice as the only defining factor disregards the broader scenario.<sup>10</sup> Despite the history of tensions between the blacks and the police, the economic indicators yield a different picture. Entrapped in financial problems, young men from all ethnic groups felt equally excluded and targeted. The protestors, therefore, comprised youth with varied ethnic backgrounds. Keeping this in mind, the looting and vandalism can be seen as deliberate acts of getting back at the authorities.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, this resentment has been primarily explained in psychological terms. There have been attempts to trace individual histories of the rioters, showing their backgrounds as being troubled. This approach, in a way, singles out the individuals for blame. For instance, the rioters' poor academic backgrounds, higher than average school absenteeism, criminal

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Lewis, *Reading the Riots*. See also [www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/05/riots/-revenge-against-police](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/05/riots/-revenge-against-police).

<sup>8</sup> "England Riots: Police Feared for their Lives", available from [www.bbc.com/news/uk-18653530](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-18653530).

<sup>9</sup> Axel Klein, "Policing as a Causal Factor – A Fresh View on Riots and Social Unrest", *Safer Communities* 11, no. 1 (2012): 17-23; See also Naomi Kleinn, "Daylight Robbery, Meet Nighttime Robbery", *Nation*, 16 August 2011.

<sup>10</sup> *The Guardian*, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Briggs (ed.), *In the English Riots of 2011*.

records, and gang involvement were noted. Forty eight percent of those arrested could not write by the age of eleven; approximately one-fifth had a record of gang involvement; two-thirds of them had special education needs; only 11% had 5 good GCSE or more and, their truancy rate was three times higher than the country's average.<sup>12</sup> Another such attempt at individualizing the guilt comes from explanations such as a background of poor parenting. Even if poor parenting was a reason, it is to be understood in the broader picture of economic inequality. Poorer parents suffer from anxiety, tiredness and lack of time to spend with kids since they work longer hours to make both ends meet. Thus, the children of such parents may feel neglected and resort to violence to express their loneliness and frustration. The crucial inference is that poor parenting is thus not a cause in itself, rather an effect of the wider social inequalities.<sup>13</sup>

The rioters interviewed, identified the strong presence of broader sensitive variables as yes factors, playing into the unrest. These included problems such as poverty (86%), governmental policy (80%), unemployment (79%), with percentages denoting the proportion of rioters agreeing that these themes had influenced their decision to riot.<sup>14</sup> Most of the rioters were young men from varied ethnic backgrounds, who felt extremely frustrated without any prospects of employment. There is strong evidence that the overwhelming majority of the rioters belonged to underprivileged backgrounds. Statistics presented by *Guardian* (2011) are disquieting and alarming: almost three-fifths of the rioters were young unemployed men.<sup>15</sup> Statistics released by the Ministry of Justice reveal that 64% of the rioters came from the poorest 20% of British households, while only 3% hailed from the richest 20%. Another important factor contributing to social unrest and rioting was the various policies of the government that disfavoured the poor. Among these government measures were the rise in tuition fees, closure of youth services and cuts in the Education Maintenance Allowance.<sup>16</sup> Spending cuts on Educational Maintenance increased the misery of many. The situation was exacerbated by increasing

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Bentham, "Half of Arrested Looters Couldn't Read by Age of 11", *Evening Standard*, 24 October 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, "Family Breakdown and the Riots", *New Statesman*, 22 August 2011, at <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2011/08/families-poverty-family>.

<sup>14</sup> Gareth Morrell and Sara Scott, *The August Riots in England*.

<sup>15</sup> Nina Power, "Context London Riots", *The Guardian*, 8 August 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Morrell and Scott, *The August Riots in England*.

competition in the job market owing to unchecked immigration in the UK over the years.<sup>17</sup>

A sharp sense of deprivation, and economic injustice inflicted by the ruling classes, were the other issues feeding into the strife. News about bankers' exemption from taxes; the introduction of austerity measures by government, and scandals about parliament members' extravagant expenses angered the masses. All these exacerbated the sense of grievance over the government's attitude of favouring the rich over the poor.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the austerity measures and welfare rollback had baneful effects on the urban poor. As an interviewee commented, "Government has a problem – the deficit – but what they're doing is taking money from those who haven't got it and giving it to those that have."<sup>19</sup> Thus, the prevailing sense of mistrust in public institutions and policies, drove the disadvantaged to try to salvage their 'share' via looting, as Varul notes.<sup>20</sup>

That inequality and injustice were behind this situation, is apparent in the demographic and urban features of the riot sites, which reveal a sharp fragmentation of the urban landscape. Hatherley draws attention to the stark parallel spatial existence of the extremely rich areas, contiguous to the slums in London, which depicts two very different (often sharply contrasting) experiences of living in the same space. Therefore, the riots can be seen as the "politics of despair".<sup>21</sup> Moreover, places such as Tottenham and Hackney present sharp social contrasts where some residents are rich and privileged, while others are economically depressed. More importantly, such places are the hubs of a complex contest; these include fissures in social life along cultural, ethnic and financial lines. The decline of local industry,<sup>22</sup> ghettoization of the blacks in the area, lack of prospects of employment and draining out of investment, point to the presence of a burgeoning underclass at the peripheries of the main urban

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<sup>17</sup> Kevin Myers, "Immigration and the London Riots", (10 August 2011), available from <http://kevinmyers.ie/2011/08/10/immigration-and-the-london-riots/>.

<sup>18</sup> Morrell and Scott, *The August Riots*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Matthias Varul, "Veblen in the (Inner) City: On the Normality of Looting," *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 4 (2011): 1.

<sup>21</sup> Owen Hatherley, "Something has Snapped, and it has been a Long Time Coming", blog available from <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/660-something-has-snapped-and-it-has-been-a-long-time-coming>.

<sup>22</sup> Morrell and Scott, *The August Riots in England*.

structure. As pointed out by Natcen “Private spaces such as Canary Wharf were less attractive to loot because of high levels of surveillance and security”.<sup>23</sup> Being areas of the affluent, the urban planning and security were of higher levels, which kept away the rioters. Thus, the looting of luxury shops, such as Debenhams’s and Curry’s<sup>24</sup> do not just reflect resentment against the authorities, but also an angry outpouring against the rich, with whom the poor could not identify.

One must exercise caution with regards to the meaning of the term ‘underclass’. Although, the term underclass is value laden, it is being used in a strictly objective manner. It refers to urban poverty with its characteristic determinants such as, deprivation, instability, lower standards of educational and structural achievements and financial dependency of the poorest segments of the population.<sup>25</sup> And such analytic categorization neatly fits the description of Clapham junction – another hotbed of unrest and rioting. It is the threshold of two distinct areas of Battersea: the affluent south, home of the upper class professionals, well-endowed with infrastructure and civic amenities vs. the impoverished north.<sup>26</sup> The stark contrast of haves and have-nots is most pronounced here, as a youth remarked, “If they [young people] ever wanted reminding of what they don’t have, this is a good place to be”.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Salford is noted for its high unemployment, with child poverty having risen to 75%. Alongside are the scattered luxury housing schemes, for a posh few.<sup>28</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that this economic paradox has resulted in strikingly disturbed race relations between Asians, blacks and the affluent communities in Salford. Besides racial tensions, there are added frustrations such as lack of provision of healthy activities like youth clubs and sports complexes. As a result, the energies of the youth find aggressive outlets like rioting. Thus, violence becomes a means of making of a statement and as many young rioters described it, as a tool to draw attention towards their plight, which they would not have been able to do otherwise.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Katz, “The Urban ‘Underclass’ as a Metaphor of Social Transformation,” in Michael B. Katz (ed.), *The “Underclass” Debate: Views from History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3-26.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Gareth Morrell and Sara Scott, *The August Riots in England*.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

### Analysis of reports

A common problem in these reports is that these focus on the *rioters* rather than the *riots*. Explanations of individual elements are not altogether tangential, but they are not well synthesized into a coherent interpretative framework. For instance, Morrell and Scott view with scepticism, social hopelessness and poverty as the underlying reasons for the riots, while they also highlight the contrary attitudes of unwarranted opportunism and greed.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the behavioural typology of those involved in the riots is rendered an individual synchronic view. There are two major problems with this approach.

Firstly, the apparent psychological profiles of rioters often reveal contradictory motivations; the variations in them, are left unexplained. For instance, rioters convey a mix of responses. "Some became excited by the carnival of it all,<sup>30</sup> (some) went along for a laugh or to see what was happening – perhaps to participate, witness or with no discernible rationale".<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, individual explanations, allow apportioning the blame neatly to individuals or external forces such as gangs, leaving out any accurate reference to the larger picture.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, this approach disguises the severity of the situation and evades understanding of the social imaginations of the non-affluent.

However, this is not to absolutely disqualify the significance of individual explanations. What is meant by the lack of an overarching view is that, undoubtedly, personal greed and opportunism are an essential part of the mix, but they are symptoms of the problem, rather than causes, in the first place. The problem with some of the discourses on rioting is that such explanations are based to a great extent on polemical grounds with political overtones. The causes are neither entirely a psychological manifestation of the lust for luxury items, nor are they purely sociological occurrences. To put it more simply, these are inter-subjective issues, intricately inter-woven. Therefore, we have to evaluate and interpret all

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Katz (ed.), *The "Underclass" Debate*, 440-448.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Briggs, "Frustrations, Urban Relations and Temptations", 9.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Lewis, *Reading the Riots*.

the causes not as mutually exclusive, valid, invalid, or less valid, rather it should be done as an overlapping, in depth analysis and interpretation.

Of all the reports, that of *The Guardian* has to be given credit for moving in this direction, for instance when it attempts to connect individual-centred narratives with discourses on inequality. The interesting connection between (lack of) opportunity and opportunism is properly addressed. The report accentuates the factor of inequality: rioters had a fragmented sense of belonging, reduced sense of self-worth, diminished opportunities for growth, and financial difficulties. Since they came from the lower rungs of the economic strata, they saw themselves as being on the margins of society, lacking the material means to fully participate in society and to gain acceptance. Their sheer hopelessness with regard to integration in society renders this form of protest justifiable, leaving aside the normative concerns. On a positive note, *Guardian* offers a springboard to debate and highlight the inherent instabilities of the social policies of the government by hinting that economic insecurity and social unrest are twin phenomena which are mutually reinforcing.<sup>33</sup>

Although, the arguments of Morrell and Scott are different from those of *Guardian*, they are quite alike in methodological focus: their vector of analysis is the situational tug or nudges factors. Natcen examines the immediate context surrounding the rioters. It lists factors such as parental involvement in either stopping or encouraging their offspring's participation in the riots. It also lists certain common concerns of the rioters such as peer pressure, level of community involvement, the fortuity of residing near the trouble spot, the effectiveness of transport links and the role of social media. Although these are pertinent, the approach is problematic since it only concentrates on the immediate stimuli. In simple words, what these reports point out are important but not sufficient to form a causal chain. And they do not answer satisfactorily the challenging question of 'why London and why now?' This issue will be discussed from other theoretical standpoints in the following section of the article.

Despite an overemphasis on the economic deprivation factor, the reports hinted at certain long-term grievances as causes of the riots. This makes it imperative to probe deeper into the issues those youth faced. An attempt

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

will therefore be made to offer an analysis of the growing disparity and polarization in London.<sup>34</sup>

### Theoretical discussions

The above discussion points to the objective facts related to the London riots. Their subjective unfolding and the interrelation of the causes must be understood in connection with the wider structural problems, such as: issues of urban governance, consumerism, European capitalism, and globalization.

Zizek discusses riots in the Hegelian paradigm of ‘rabble’, which means those acting outside an organized social space. Zizek attributes this to the problems of capitalism in Europe, which he argues do not allow any meaningful way to survive in the system and/or to get rid of economic oppression.<sup>35</sup> Thus either you abide by the rules or resort to violence. Similarly, Wark argues that riots are a permanent feature of modern urban life [and not a matter of gang involvement as conservatives suggest]; rather they are a deeper urban phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> Thus, social problems which underlie rioting have been cast in different shades, from disturbed urban structure to economic interests as Badiou notes<sup>37</sup>, and grievances over poverty to consumer capitalism as Harvey stresses.<sup>38</sup>

The capitalist mode is identified as one of the major structural economic problems, inherent in modern urban societies, and thus disenchantment with it, is reflected in riots. The problem with capitalism, according to Zizek (based on Badiou’s idea), is that it does not have a single coherent worldview. Global capitalism has thus created a “worldless” system, which offers no deeper meaning to life, with the consequence that there is constant unrest.<sup>39</sup> Such global unrest and dissatisfaction results in what Naomi Klein calls “global saqueo”: sacking legitimized by a sense of

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<sup>34</sup> Gareth Morrell and Sara Scott, *The August Riots in England*.

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Zizek, “Shoplifters of the World Unite”, *London Review of Books*, available from <http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite>.

<sup>36</sup> McKenzie Wark, “The Logic of Riots”, Verso, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/666-mckenzie-wark-the-logic-of-riots>.

<sup>37</sup> Alian Badiou, “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?” in *Polemics*, 2nd ed., trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2011), 292-321.

<sup>38</sup> Harvey David, “Feral Capitalism Hits the Streets”, available at <http://davidharvey.org/2011/08/feral-capitalism-hits-the-streets/>.

<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Zizek, “Shoplifters of the World Unite”.

*entitlement to loot*, as the wealthy and the government have been doing the same to keep the capitalist order running. The riots, then, are “day time robbery”, in reaction to the “night time robbery” going on in the corrupt, unequal, capitalist society.<sup>40</sup>

Harvey also criticizes capitalism, pointing to its inherent “feral” instincts. He blames the bankers and politicians for plundering the European economy in legal guise. The poor youth in London streets, he argues, did the same thing (looting and plundering) but in an open manner – hence drawing direct blame. In Harvey’s view what de-criminalized the act of looting was the belief that the higher authorities were doing the same thing in the garb of legality, while they deprived the poor of any chance of progressing and enjoying a “good life”.<sup>41</sup>

The role of consumerism (an inherent characteristic of capitalist society) has also been extensively discussed by Zizek, who expresses his discontentment with the materialistic culture, which has become the only aspiration of the individual for social fulfillment.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Bauman employs the 'material' approach, explaining the pattern of the riots in the context of consumerism. Since the urban poor could not consume by shopping, they used other means like vandalism and looting to 'consume'. He compares this social unrest with minefields, which sooner or later, inevitably explode. Thus, this obsession with looting and stealing branded items does indeed indicate a materialism of some sort; however, it is not a singular instance of pure criminality, as politicians were quick to describe it.<sup>43</sup> Rather, this materialism or consumerism needs to be evaluated as a social fact.

Wark goes beyond Bauman's idea of consumerism in describing this aspect of the issue; the rioters did not want to indulge in consumption or commodification but to escape the very idea of it. He draws this idea from Poltach’s\* concept of how a commodity has been converted into a *gift*

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<sup>40</sup> Naomi Klein, “Daylight Robbery, Meet Nighttime Robbery,” *Nation*, 16 August 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey David, “Feral Capitalism Hits the Streets”.

<sup>42</sup> Zizek, “Shoplifters of the World Unite”.

<sup>43</sup> Zygmunt Bauman. “The London Riots – On Consumerism Coming Home to Roost,” *Social Europe Journal* 4, no. 11 (August 2011).

\* Reference to Maussian exchange system, where circulation of gift determines the society’s economic order. See Marcel Mauss, *Essai Sur Le Don* (1925), trans. *The Gift* in 1954.

through its portrayal in the media as an object of fascination. However, he argues, such attempts result in tensions between ideal and actual circumstances in society, widening the fissures, as manifested in the riots in London. Hence, owing to the materialist culture and media representations of the images of consumerist lifestyles, we are trapped in a vicious cycle of economic competition and unrest.<sup>44</sup>

A similar argument has been presented by Maher against the “do-it-yourself-consumerism” view of the riots. He argues that if this were the case, the fantasized commodities should have been appropriated by the rioters, but there were many instances where the rioters preferred to destroy the luxurious commodities.<sup>45</sup>

The destructive emotions show that the frustrations were not simply because of inability to consume in a consumerist society; rather the rage had much deeper causes targeting the consumerist ideology itself.

Moreover, the London riots are also to be understood in terms of urban governance issues in metropolitan cities like London. In the urban setting, streets are the sites of contestation for power for those who do not have access to formal tools of power.<sup>46</sup> This, points to the political nature of urban governance and its relationship to the lives of the citizens. A rising elitism can be seen since the 1980’s, with the poor being squeezed out of London. This development has given impetus to street protests.<sup>47</sup> Historically, spending cuts in the Thatcher years led to similar outbreaks of protests. Although, in 2011, rioters may not have had an explicit political agenda, the role of political maneuvering is quite apparent.<sup>48</sup> This political aspect unfolds in a complex manner in urban issues. Compared to the 1981 riots, the issue of racial discrimination remains, but its nature has changed. Gilroy believes that it has been institutionalized, for instance, in police

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<sup>44</sup> Wark, “The Logic of Riots”.

<sup>45</sup> George Ciccariello-Maher, “Planet of Slums, Age of Riots,” *Counter Punch*, available at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/08/12/planet-of-slums-age-of-riots/>.

<sup>46</sup> Saskia Sassen, “Why Riot Now?” *Daily Beast*, 15 August 2011. Visit <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/08/14/why-did-britain-s-riots-happen-now.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Nina Power, “Context London Riots”, *The Guardian*, 8 August 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Saskia Sassen and Richard Sennett, “When Budget Cuts Lead to Broken Windows,” *New York Times*, 10 August 2011. See [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/11/opinion/when-budget-cuts-lead-to-broken-windows.html?\\_r=3&hp&\\_](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/11/opinion/when-budget-cuts-lead-to-broken-windows.html?_r=3&hp&_)

handling methods. It is not only the blacks who are being discriminated against, other minorities too feel marginalized.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, analyzing the London riots in a comparative context, has been complicated by the drastically changed structure of the city and its demographic balance since then. In this regard, Gilroy points out that the entry in the labour market of cheap East European labour is very important. He further notes, that over the years, the role of technology and the relation between information and power has changed.<sup>50</sup> For instance, in the recent riots, social media such as the BlackBerry was extensively used in planning, co-ordinating and directing rioters. In a broader sense, media appeared politicized in their coverage of the riots, particularly the causes. The BBC was criticized for 'justifying' the looters, and other channels for falsely portraying and making viral the image that the looters were getting away with it. This, it was alleged had motivated many onlookers to join the rioting.<sup>51</sup> Hence, media was not only a tool for contest, but also provided virtual space for the politics of upheaval.

This politicization is pertinent to the London riots, because, as Gilroy notes, those in power (such as politicians and media owners) were acting in concert as a class against the poor. Thus, we can see that elitism is as much a political issue as a matter connected to governance.<sup>52</sup> This politicization, has been massively triggered by the globalizing forces. For instance, in the case of Britain, the banking industry's clever tactics for influencing government decisions regarding tax waivers reflect the sheer power of the financial system.

Likewise, Mayer asserts that the neo-liberal agenda whose global financial impact has played havoc in European countries' economies and politics, encouraged the uneven wealth and development structure in London. Mayer continues that the riots allowed the localizing of the global recognition of rights such as equal pay and welfare support, by airing the

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Gilroy, "Paul Gilroy Speaks on the Riots, August 2011, Tottenham, North London", *Dream of Safety*, entry posted 16 August 2011, available from <http://dreamofsafety.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/paul-gilroy-speaks-on-riots-august-2011.html?spref=fb>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Tim Shipman, "Left-Wing Cynics Blame the Tory Cuts for Orgy of Violence: MPs and Activists Line up to Make Excuses for Thugs," *Daily Mail*, 9 August 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Gilroy, "Paul Gilroy Speaks on the Riots".

grievances of the underclass in concrete terms and in contextual setting.<sup>53</sup> London seems a perfect example of the impact of the neo-liberal agenda, where the various dynamics of economic deprivation and other inequities were brought to light in the recent riots.

Another layer of analysis is uncovered by tessellating the London riots within a series of global social uprisings. Most notably, the London riots have been likened to the French riots, with certain interesting patterns which need to be noted. Noteworthy is the humiliating experience of ethnic minorities with policing authorities,<sup>54</sup> and the presence of subcultures in a city, constantly creating a space of tension.<sup>55</sup> The 'Arab Spring', the protests in Greece and Spain etc. exhibit an overwhelming sense of helplessness and impotency in the face of capitalist forces: disenchanting youth, crumbling economies and dysfunctional societies, all seeking long-term social change of massive intent.<sup>56</sup> Another such phenomenon is the Occupy Wall Street movement. All these uprisings are both apolitical and political: apolitical because they have no clear agenda or predefined social order to implement or call for in the immediate context; and political because it reflects a social contest and disenchantment with the neo-liberal policies and the capitalist system.

### Conclusion

We therefore see, that there is no single explanation for the London riots. Rather they have to be seen as a "combination of chance, context, and causation which explain why disorders occur".<sup>57</sup> While the immediate causes such as welfare cuts, scrapping of EMA, unemployment and mistrust in police and governmental authorities offer some explanation for the events, these causes themselves have to be placed in the wider socio-economic context. Studied in isolation and on its own, the London revolt seems to fit into no single explanation; nor does it portend any patent

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<sup>53</sup> Margrit Mayer, "The Rights to the City" in Neil Brenner and Peter Marcuse (eds.), *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City* (London: Routledge, 2011), 63-85.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Shin, "Alain Badiou on Riots and Racism: 'Daily Humiliation'" (22 August 2011). See <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/681-alain-badiou-on-riots-and-racism-daily-humiliation>.

<sup>55</sup> Sophie Body-Gendrot, "Disorder in World Cities: Comparing Britain and France," *Open Democracy*, 15 August 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, "Shoplifters of the World Unite".

<sup>57</sup> Sophie Body-Gendrot, "Disorder in World Cities".

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programme of social re-organization. However, when seen in the wider global political context, it can be understood as a manifestation of deep-rooted problems and wider structural issues that are inherent in the present day urban life in capitalist Europe.

Hence, when contextualized and historicized, we get a more nuanced picture of the London riots: as seen in Lefebvre's paradigm of the right to the city. Thus the London riots have to be analyzed in the broadest possible fashion based on the historical continuum of urbanization and its discontents and the challenges and opportunities it creates.<sup>58</sup> Seen from this perspective, the disorder commonly labeled as a riot (suggesting its outrageous and offensive nature) appears to be a logical civil movement; it is yet another link in the series of parallel social movements in the world, calling for a new world order. Given the contemporary socio-economic situation in global cities, uprisings such as the London riots are an expected and inevitable occurrence.

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<sup>58</sup> Cited Henri Lefebvre "The Right to the City", in Margrit Mayer, "The Right to the City".