Agency in the British Press

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A Corpus-based Discourse Analysis of the 2011 UK Riots

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INTRODUCTION

The present research aims at examining the ways in which the British press reported the 2011 UK riots with a specific emphasis on the linguistic construal of the main participants involved in the protests and their agency.

Previous investigations in the field of newspaper discourse have tackled the question of how similar violent and disruptive events were reported by the media, in the attempt to uncover the underlying power relations operating within society. Indeed, monitoring the representations conveyed by the media in general, and the press in particular, focusing on how agency is linguistically framed, can be very revealing in terms of their political, social and cultural stances. Since the linguistic labels employed by the newspapers to identify (and connote) the protagonists of the disturbances are indicative of their ideological positions, a critical attention to the specialised language of the press can be extremely noteworthy.

Such issues also appear pivotal in the light of the several on-going debates on modern democracies, whose political agenda aspires to achieve social reforms and a more cohesive social fabric, setting themselves as models of liberal prosperity, welcoming openness and social security. The disorders and urban unrest that periodically occur not only in the UK but also within the wider European context (suffice it to mention the French *banlieues* riots in 2005 or the Swedish riots in 2013) expose an ugly side that is often concealed, but that has long festered under the surface of an alleged perfectly functional welfare system. As a matter of fact, the explosion of deep resentment that usually finds expression in the riots can be regarded as a symptom of the governments' failure to deal with persisting social and economic problems. The violence that broke out on the streets of London, Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester (as much as Paris, Stockholm and elsewhere) raises questions about how the societies in which we live respond to the many latent tensions that are occasionally inflamed and exacerbated, and it calls for revised governance practices. While contesting all ideas of egalitarianism, and social and cultural integration, the rioters seem to reclaim a space of visibility to articulate their (dissenting) voices. The riots therefore pose a big and interesting challenge for investigation.

The historical and social background of the UK riots

August 2011 can be considered as a benchmark in the UK's most recent history: a protest started on the outskirts of London soon turned into a countrywide wave of riots. Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old man, was shot dead by police in Tottenham, on 4th August. However, the circumstances of his killing were uncertain and controversial. Officers of the Metropolitan Police Service had stopped a minicab carrying Duggan as a passenger, who was suspected of being involved in drug trafficking and of being in possession of a handgun. According to an unnamed firearms officer, he got out of the cab and pulled a handgun from his waistband. The taxi driver said he left the car and ran. An eyewitness claimed that Duggan was shot while being held down on the floor by police, whereas according to another witness, a police officer shouted 'Put it down' twice before Duggan was shot, later claiming he honestly believed that he was in imminent danger of being shot. What was certain was that the police fired twice, hitting him in the thigh and chest, thus killing him.

On 6th August, Duggan's relatives and friends peacefully marched from Broadwater Farm to Tottenham Police Station, asking the police for information about Duggan's death. A chief inspector spoke with them, but they required to see a higher-rank officer. When the police tried to disperse the people who had gathered, they began to protest, and members of the crowd attacked two nearby police cars setting them on fire. Violence immediately sparked from Aug. 7th to 10th, with rioting, arson and looting spread to other parts of London and then elsewhere in England. Violent clashes along with the destruction of police vehicles, double-decker buses, civilian homes and businesses occurred in Hackney, Brixton, Peckham, Battersea, Croydon, Ealing and East Ham, and in other cities including Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, and Manchester. There were 3,443 crimes across London linked to the disorder and, by August 15th, 3,100 people had been arrested and more than 1,000 had been charged. An estimated £200 million worth of property damage was incurred and the local economic activities were significantly compromised.

The media soon began to cover the events, although the incident that sparked the worst social unrest in a generation – the fatal shooting by police of Mark Duggan – was initially reported quite inaccurately, according to some commentators. The riots became the subject of media speculation and academic studies, and there were a number of debates on whether British reporting was balanced in terms of the images used, analysis and breadth of interviews. A conference held in London in November 2011, called *Media and the Riots*, tackled the questions of

objectivity in the news reports on the disturbances, of whether the mainstream media allowed their own reporters' moral attitudes to the emotive and shocking events seep into the reporting, of how the young people involved in the riots were stereotyped (possibly demonising Duggan, the Black male victim, and stigmatising youths in general), disseminating misinformation or being manipulated by politicians and police. The report that was written after the conference, *Media and the Riots: A Call for Action* (Bassel 2012), describes most of the accounts of the disturbances as simply disgraceful. Despite the fact that a balanced media coverage of the events was extremely hard to achieve since people were exposed to images of burning buildings, masked youths, and shattered shop windows (which consequently mainly shaped the way the riots were understood), some thoughts should have been also given to what the mainstream media did wrong – given their undeniable ability to affect public opinions – condemning some participants, adopting a moralising attitude, relying only on official sources (usually the police). The lack of political representation was considered to be a major problem for young people, especially Black people and the African Caribbean community. According to the report, the media failed to account for the issues that were at the heart of the riots, namely poverty, government spending cuts, deaths in custody, and police stop-and-search techniques disproportionally affecting young black men. Therefore, questions of representation and marginalization appeared of paramount importance in the mainstream media reporting of the disorders.

Outline of the book

The research moves from such acknowledgements relating to an apparently overall unbalanced news coverage, to examine the most recurrent images emerging from the reporting of the British press.

In the past, similar events of social unrest were invariably described as 'race' riots by the media, and most of the resulting debates revolved around the several injustices and inequalities experienced by minorities and ethnic groups, a condition which appeared very rooted in the British society with varying forms of institutional and daily racism. Back to the second half of the 20th century, Great Britain had already been confronting for some time with the arrival of the so-called 'sons from its overseas empire'.[1] However, the several new-comers had to endure prejudice,

[1] After the losses caused by World War II, the British government had encouraged a mass migration from the countries of the British colonies and the Commonwealth,

intolerance and racism from the indigenous society. Since the late 1950s, clashes between white and black people began to hit many cities, including London, Birmingham and Nottingham, among the others. So, while the political and cultural debates had often concentrated on the impact of the mother-country on its colonies, of the coloniser on the colonised, in those years more and more attention was paid to what colonialism had meant to the UK on the domestic front. London, in particular, provided a window into this reciprocity, because post-war immigration from the colonies changed the very urban space that British people were not so used to share, and forced white identities into an increasingly diverse multicultural space.

By the late 1970s, the nation's first generation of British-born black people (especially of West Indian descent) had started claiming a larger stake in society, which deeply impacted on Britain's public and political sphere. In addition to the social tensions deriving from increasing cultural and ethnic conflicts and this sort of post-imperial *malaise*, the 1970s and 1980s were decades of deep recession and widespread unemployment, which obviously affected the less prosperous African-Caribbean community in the first place. Therefore, the combination of poverty, powerlessness, oppressive policing tactics, discrimination and racism led to the riots that sparked in the 1980s, which had remarkably unsettling effects on the whole population, struggling with the fears and uncertainties arising from the proximity with diversity and post-colonial otherness. Accordingly, the Scarman report (that was commissioned by the then Home Secretary William Whitelaw with the aim to address the causes of the 1980s disturbances) identified racial discrimination and racial disadvantage as the root of the riots, concluding that urgent action was needed to prevent such issues from becoming an "endemic, ineradicable disease threatening the very survival of [the British] society" (Scarman 1981: 27). However, still in the 1990s, racist attacks continued to increase; ethnic minorities – especially African-Caribbeans – were persistently and invariably associated to crime, despite the fact that the London Metropolitan Police Service was found to be institutionally racist by the

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in the attempt to fill the shortages in the labour market in a post-war Britain with plenty of work. So in 1948 the British Nationality Act gave British citizenship to all people living in Commonwealth countries, together with the right to entry and settle in the UK. The consequent influx of large numbers of people was perceived as an invasion by the local population, who then began to feel worryingly threatened. Despite the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) later restricted the entry of immigrants from the former colonies, an entire generation of Britons with African-Caribbean heritage was by then part of the British society.

Macpherson Report (1999), a subsequent government inquiry into police conduct.

The overview of past events and of a background knowledge on the previous riots in the UK was a necessary step because it provided important insights to understand the most recent disorders. Moving from these assumptions, the book aims at exploring the extent to which issues of social, cultural, ethnic discrimination could still be said to play a role within the British society, after the violent disturbances that took place in August 2011. By drawing on a variety of sources and studies, this research analyses the ways in which the British press reported the riots, paying special attention to the portrayals of the subjects involved in the events, their linguistic construals, and the different emerging readings of the social unrest foregrounding or downplaying specific aspects, especially those relating to the motivations for the riots.

The book starts from cultural and sociological analyses of the riots, contextualising the events (Chapter One). The findings of studies carried out by the Runnymede Trust (an independent race equality think tank), highlighting that the events were too quickly dismissed by the media as sheer and opportunistic looting, together with the findings emerging from the London School of Economics investigation (in collaboration with *The Guardian*), uncovering a number of political reasons behind the rioters' (mis)deeds, do offer an interesting lens to frame the events. They reflect on a range of questions that appear socially and culturally relevant, but which were given a differing weight in the reporting of the newspapers. As a matter of fact, the riots seemed to represent a critical moment in the UK's contemporary history, posing a big challenge in the light of the many and recurrent debates on multiculturalism, diversity, and the so-called convivial culture, namely "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (Gilroy 2004a: xv). Concerns over the British failure to explain its post-colonial conflicts and accommodate otherness in relation to a fundamental commonality are still widely present in ongoing discussions on how to envision new conceptions of identity and belonging. This is the reason why the debates on the riots have generally viewed the disturbances from the standpoint of culture and ethnicity. The other major perspective from which (especially) the most recent events were framed was that of consumerism, with rioters reacting to their lack of something that was considered as socially prescribed, but which they could not access. In this context, deprivation would have caused a deep humiliation from which a symbolic and material violence

arose. In both cases, these studies provide remarkable insights into a deeper understanding of the riots.

The book moves on presenting the main existing studies on media discourse and newspaper language, especially in relation to riots (Chapter Two). Indeed, this field of investigation can prove very revealing as far as political, social and cultural meanings are concerned; it seemed worth exploring since, while shaping public opinions and beliefs, it sets the agenda giving relevance to certain topics and events within the country. Above all, news reports, seen as a practice intervening in the construction of reality, assess the significance of events, providing readers with the frames to make them comprehensible. Among the many 'critical' approaches to the study of media and newspaper discourse – ranging from Critical Linguistics (Fowler *et al.* 1979; Fowler 1991) and Cultural Studies (Hall *et al.* 1978; Hall *et al.* 1980) to structural discourse analysis (Bell 1984, 1991) and multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2001) – Critical Discourse Analysis has certainly given a crucial contribution to the investigation of the role of discourse in the reproduction and challenging of the dominant socio-political order. Within this framework, the scientific research of two scholars in particular, Teun van Dijk and Norman Fairclough, appeared pivotal for the goals of this study. Although from different angles, the former from a socio-cognitive perspective (van Dijk 1988a, 1988b), the latter from a discourse-practice perspective (Fairclough 1995a, 1995b), both have underlined that the media tend to build ideologically-based versions of reality, aiming at persuading their audience that certain events are good or bad, thus determining specific attitudes and affecting the formation of public opinions.

The project then proceeds to clarify the methodology chosen and the parameters adopted for the design and collection of the *2011_UKRiots* corpus (Chapter Three). About 1,700 articles (1,112,471 tokens) – including reports, features, editorials and op-eds – were collected from the six British newspapers with the highest circulation rates in August 2011: *Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, The Sun, The Guardian*, *The Telegraph, The Times,* and their Sunday editions. This specialised corpus gathers the articles published over a time span ranging from the beginning of August (the riots occurred between August 6th-10th) to the end of December 2011, thus covering the first five months soon after the events, which was regarded as the most salient period. After being refined and annotated, the corpus was ready for analysis, whose data and findings are extensively presented in Chapters Four and Five.

More specifically, Chapter Four covers the different stages of investigation: the first, qualitative stage leading to the identification of the

main participants and the most recurrent strategies through which they were defined, using van Leeuwen's framework of social actors (van Leeuwen 1996, 2008); the second, quantitative stage resulting in a series of data concerning frequency information, which allowed the semantic categorisation of the several terms employed in connection to one subject in particular, the rioters. Further analysis of the concordances retrieved for each social actor in each newspaper then gives corpus evidence of the most recurring linguistic representations of Mark Duggan, the rioters and the police.

Moving from such findings, Chapter Five focuses exclusively on the evaluative language that was used by the British press when reporting on the three participants under investigation. In fact, the protagonists to the riots can be deemed as important 'sites' of evaluation, where the newspapers' stances and viewpoints appear encoded in the language they employ. Therefore, despite the fact that evaluation may be difficult to spot through corpus techniques – because it is subjective, value-laden and extended over the co-text in which the node words appear (Hunston 1994; Thompson and Hunston 2000) – evaluative statements are noteworthy since they express ideologies that are shared by writers (the newspapers) and readers. Hence, special attention is necessarily paid to the analysis of the nominal, adjectival and verbal collocates co-occurring with the lexical items referring to the participants, and then examined in the light of the basic evaluative parameters of good and bad, looking for their (more or less) positive or negative construals as conveyed by the British press.

CHAPTER ONE

RIOTS IN CONTEXT: URBAN RELATIONS AND SOCIAL DISCONTENT

The riots that occurred in the UK in 2011 were defined by the media as the worst disturbances in decades, with violent protests and thousands of people causing four days of mayhem, rampaging London and other major cities across the country, as a reaction to the police shooting of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old man. Since the circumstances of his killing – in Tottenham, London, on 4th August 2011 – were quite uncertain and controversial, his relatives and friends peacefully marched from Broadwater Farm to Tottenham Police Station, expecting some information about his death. When their request to see a high-rank officer was dismissed, tension levels gradually rose until some members of the crowd attacked two nearby police cars, setting them on fire. Violence immediately sparked from Aug. 7th to 10th, with rioting, arson and looting in London – in areas like Hackney, Brixton, Peckham, Battersea, Croydon, Ealing and East Ham – as well as in other cities including Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, and Manchester.

1.1 Revisiting past riots in the UK

Despite the 'striking surprise' with which the British media reported the social unrest – as an exceptional and unprecedented event – as a matter of fact, the riots seem to be a relatively frequent phenomenon in the British history. Indeed, over the last four decades, the UK has experienced a relevant number of extremely violent protests.

In 1981, the general recession affecting the country had devastating effects on areas that had been already hit by serious social and economic problems. In the south of London, the African-Caribbean community – which was suffering from particularly high rates of unemployment, poor housing, and a higher than average crime rate – burst in a harsh confrontation with the MET. Up to 5,000 people were involved in the events (that were then known as Brixton riots), there were hundreds of

injuries both to police and members of the public, over a hundred vehicles were burned and almost 150 buildings were damaged (some of them burned). As for the episode that sparked the riots, a black man, Michael Bailey, was stopped by a police officer and found badly bleeding; as the police did not seem to be providing or even seeking the necessary medical help, a crowd gathered and tried to intervene. Bailey was eventually taken to hospital, but rumours spread that a stabbed man had been left to die on the street by the police, which provoked the angry reaction of over 200 youths (reportedly black and white), believing he died as a result of police brutality. As violence escalated, it was more and more evident that racial tensions played a major part in the disturbances.

After the 1981 riots, the Home Secretary William Whitelaw commissioned a public inquiry into the events, which was headed by Lord Scarman – and was followed by the publication of the so-called Scarman report, late in the same year. The report found unquestionable evidence of a disproportionate and indiscriminate use of stop and search powers by the police especially against black people (something that led to a new code of behaviour and the creation of an independent Police Complaints Commission in the attempt to restore public confidence in the police). However, the recommendations of the Scarman report to tackle the problems deriving from racial disadvantage in inner-city areas were not implemented and rioting broke out again in 1985.

Therefore, within only four years, there was the second major riot in the same area, which was sparked by the police shooting of Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce, a Jamaican woman who had migrated to the UK in her youth: officers were looking for her son in relation to a suspected firearms offence, believing he was hiding in his mother's home. Apparently, without giving the required warning (that is meant to alert residents that a raid is about to proceed), they raided into the house and incidentally shot at Mrs Groce, who then remained paralysed below the waist. The 'incident' was immediately perceived by many local residents as further evidence of what was widely regarded as a form of institutional racism in the MET. Hostility between a largely black crowd and a largely white police force quickly escalated into two days of fierce street battles, with several shops looted, and buildings and cars destroyed.

After ten years, in 1995, Brixton was again the scene of violent – but shorter – protests following the death in police custody of Wayne Douglas, a black 26-year-old man who was said to have robbed a couple in bed at knifepoint. Since, at the time, the disproportionate number of black or ethnic minority deaths in police custody was a very debated issue, a peaceful protest march outside Brixton Police Station then turned into a (5-

hour) riot resulting in damage to property and vehicles in the area, some police officers hurt and about 20 people arrested and charged with public order offences, theft, and criminal damage. Also in this case, hundreds of black and white youths were said to have participated to the unrest, attacking police, ransacking shops, burning cars, and facing what, according to some witnesses, was an incredibly heavy-handed police reaction.

The recent British history then seems to be characterized by relatively recurrent episodes of rioting and looting, as far as the last decades are concerned. Some of these riots were the focus of a number of linguistic studies (mostly based on Critical Discourse Analysis) aiming at understanding how the British press reported the events – especially in terms of agency and representation. Their findings and data constitute an important starting point for this investigation since they give relevant insights into the ways in which the British press reported the news concerning the riots and the rioters in the recent past.

The British reporting has typically portrayed riots and rioters drawing on a limited range of images from contexts relating to conflict, deviance, threat and anti-social behaviour. According to the existing studies on the news reports of the 1981 and 1985 riots in the UK (van Dijk 1989, 1993), the British quality press adopted some recurring elements in the description of the events:

- crime and crime-related topics were very common in the riot portrayal as an orgy of murder, arson, looting, petrol bombs, barricades, and fights with police;
- the criminal nature of the disturbances was enhanced by emphasizing evidence of 'vicious' or 'malicious' premeditation;
- the events were often termed as a 'collapse of civil order', a 'direct challenge to the rule of law'.

Therefore, the riots were primarily depicted within the framework of law and order, crime, anarchy and terror spreading in the British society. More interestingly, the events were also strongly connoted in terms of their racial aspects, thus being explicitly and habitually defined as 'race' riots.

Indeed, following the afore-mentioned studies, the media in general, and the press in particular, can be said to have often associated minorities with specific forms of 'ethnic' crimes such as aggression, mugging, prostitution, drugs and rioting. Minorities, especially young, male, Black or Afro-Caribbean people, were perceived as problematic, deviant, criminal and fully blamed for the riots; in fact, they were usually characterized as troublemakers and perpetrators of crimes by terms such as 'hooligans', 'thugs' and 'mobs'. This depiction also contributed to the

production of very marked group representations opposing 'ingroup' and 'outgroup', namely 'us' – British, white, law-abiding people – and 'them' – immigrants, black, alien and criminals, with an evaluative charge opposing good to bad.

1.2 The 2011 riots: from the 'race' issue to 'hyper-consumerism'

Moving to the most recent events, issues of race and cultural alienation and the degree to which tensions between different ethnic communities affected the events appear as an uncomfortable question that the UK had to face again after the 2011 riots. Several observers have warned that the answer was a complex and multifaceted one. For instance, according to the Runnymede Trust – the UK's leading independent race equality think-tank researching for a multi-ethnic Britain – the 2011 disturbances resembled the violent unrest that led to the 'race' riots in the 1980s in the African-Caribbean community (with some common features being the anger towards police and their discriminatory conduct, high levels of unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion). However, in this case, the events unfolded into something less recognizable than in the past, in terms of the scale of events, the number of participants involved, and the multiple locations of the disturbances. In their view, the media were too quick in dismissing and/or marginalising racial injustice as a factor of the events: "[t]he claim was that since the rioters were from a range of ethnic backgrounds, the riots were not racialised. […] [I]t was further suggested that there were no clear reasons for the riots beyond 'criminality, pure and simple'" (Nwabuzo 2012: 2). In other words, they assert that, as the riots spread, the media coverage shifted away from issues concerning race and discrimination and concentrated on the looting and its violent and criminal aspects. This process is said to have made politicians and the media complicit in fuelling some kind of moral panic: the events were strongly and purposely connoted as threatening the social order, thus consigning the country to a general hysteria.

The framework of moral panic, that was first theorised by Cohen (1972) and was later further developed in a linguistic model by McEnery (2006), explores the extent to which public discourse can be controlled and directed by the media. A moral panic occurs when a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen 2002: 1). More specifically, moral panics are controversies that involve social tensions and topics that are configured as taboos, while the people who foreground them are called

'folk devils'. By simply reporting facts, the media have operated as agents of moral indignation, generating concern, anxiety, or eventually panic (Cohen 2002: 16). A number of sociologists have contributed to the formulation of this concept, concentrating on a range of aspects. Whether the emphasis is on moral panic as a crisis of capitalism (Thompson 2006) or on the public reaction to the phenomenon of mugging and its relating ideological function of social control (Hall *et al.* 1978), some subjects are usually demonised.[1] By creating a high degree of concern (that the behaviour of a group negatively affects society) and hostility towards the so-called 'folk devils', a clear binary distinction can be drawn between 'us' and 'them'. Such a paradigm can also be said to have worked in the case of the 2011 UK riots. According to the Runnymede Trust, newspapers presented the events as unconnected to wider problems in society, consequently allowing the establishment to call for law-enforcement solutions rather than reckoning about the necessity for a political change. Similarly, the urban space is seen as the space of coercion rather than a highly contested terrain, a place of contestation open to the multiple demands for rights and participation.

Depending on the different political orientations, a series of explanations for the outburst of the riots were found: for the Left, poverty and inequality were the underlying social problems, for the Right the social unrest was evidence of a moral decline (Cameron talked of a 'slow-motion moral collapse' – *The Telegraph* 14/08/11, *Daily Mail* 15/08/11, among the others). According to other views, both analyses could be said to fall under the rubric of consumer capitalism (Palmer 2013: 1). This is also the position taken by Zygmunt Bauman (one of the world's most eminent social theorists), according to whom these riots were an explosion that was bound to happen sooner or later, and that was sparked by a combination of consumerism with rising inequality:

> [t]his 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 (2011a).

[1] Adopting Cohen's paradigm of moral panic, Hall *et al.* (1978) theorised that the phenomenon of mugging – that they assumed had been imported from the American culture in the UK – was 'exploited' to perform an ideological function relating to social control. In other words, rising crime rates and crime statistics appeared to be manipulated for political and economic purposes, in the attempt to create public support for the need to 'police the crisis'.

Assuming – as he does – that "postmodern society engages its members primarily in their capacity as consumers" (Bauman 2000: 76), the 2011 UK riots could then be seen as the uprising of frustrated consumers: in other words, the rioters appear as "flawed consumers" (Palmer 2013: 2), inadequate consumers who felt 'deficient', lacking something that was 'socially prescribed' and which they could not access, which generated their destructiveness and violence.

When analysing the potential reasons playing some part in the disturbances, the hypothesis of social inequality should also – and inevitably – be considered. However, even accepting looting as the main reason to riot, very little space was given to further thoughts on it: Bauman, on the contrary, contextualised the looting explaining that it was the result of a 'hyper-consumerism', a product of the growth of social inequality where groups of young people feel left out of 'consumer culture' (Bauman 2011a). Such a deprivation of (consumerist) resources would have caused a deep humiliation, from which a symbolic and material violence stemmed.[2] By bringing chaos into order, rioters – as flawed consumers – turned the British cities into the epicentre of danger and violence. Far from attempting to change the present order with another, they reacted to such order with "an un-planned, un-integrated, spontaneous explosion of accumulated frustration that can be only explained in terms of 'because of', not in terms of 'in order to'" (Bauman 2011a). This seems, indeed, a pivotal point, not only considering the most recent social disturbances, but also in the wake of the previous riots that hit the UK in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, the problem seems to be that the sources of the widespread humiliation that many people felt were left untouched, while the Government merely looked for instant solutions. This sort of 'dark heart' that has nestled within the country for a long time, was then brought into focus with the 2011 events, when the British society as a whole was obliged to confront with it.

Apart from the underlying (racial or consumerist) reasons for the riots, there was a common view slowly emerging from debates and discussions: these were not "issueless riots" (Nwabuzo 2012: 25). The political

[2] The media are often said to play a vital role in sustaining the political, economic and moral basis for marketing goods and imposing a profit-driven social order, something which some scholars regard as a process involving a form of invisible and symbolic violence exercised upon the society of consumers (Žižek 2008). This view appears confirmed by some of the interviews included in the *Reading the Riots* project: in fact, some of the rioters mentioned the pressure and 'hunger' for the right brand names, the right goods, like IPhones, BlackBerrys, laptops and designer clothes.

motivations were harder to identify, but the global, national and local scenario was to be accounted for. In fact, research has shown that in times of austerity, there is an undeniable link between civil unrest and austerity programmes, with undermined communities and failing political institutions (Taylor-Gooby 2012). Therefore, politics clearly seems to deserve great attention when tackling the topics connected to the riots. Stuart Hall, who was a seminal figure in Cultural Studies for his articulation of the British multicultural society under Thatcherism (among the many areas to which he gave his contribution), declared to be mostly stricken by the status of the Left – rather than by the failure of multiculturalism that was advocated by the Right. In an interview to *The Guardian*, he claimed that the problem with the Left is that it has no ideas, no independent analysis of its own, and therefore no vision; "it has no sense of politics being educative, of politics changing the way people see things" (*The Guardian*, 10/02/12). This view is certainly more politically pessimistic than the one he held 30 years ago, when the 1980s riots occurred. The Labour Party should have inspired people, making a strong moral case out of the social unrest that shook Britain in the past decades. Instead, austerity programmes, the failures of multicultural policies and the absence of politics and of an inspiring Left, all met and merged in the 2011 riots. Further on this point, there are two central questions that, according to Hall (*The Guardian*, 10/02/12), need to be stressed:

> First, nothing really has changed. Some kids at the bottom of the ladder are deeply alienated, they've taken the message of Thatcherism and Blairism and the coalition: what you have to do is hustle. Because nobody's going to help you. And they've got no organised political voice, no organised black voice and no sympathetic voice on the left. That kind of anger, coupled with no political expression, leads to riots. It always has. The second point is: where does this find expression in going into a store and stealing trainers? This is the point at which consumerism, which is the cutting edge of neoliberalism, has got to them too. Consumerism puts everyone into a single channel. You're not doing well, but you're still free to consume. We're all equal in the eyes of the market.

From this perspective, neoliberalism has affected and infected the way young people seem to respond to poverty, with its liberal views advocating support for economic liberalizations, free trade and open markets, privatization and deregulation to enhance the role of the private sector in contemporary society.

In the absence of an official government inquiry into the 2011 riots, the killing of Mark Duggan and the subsequent miscommunication between

the MET and his family seems to have acted as a catalyst for the riots: it appeared to trigger memories of past injustices that ethnic minority groups have had to suffer because of a discriminatory justice system. Such a perception was, indeed, supported by feelings of harassment, anger and frustration in relation to the police's stop-and-search tactics, which are deemed to increasingly target minority communities: also according to government data, black people are far more likely to be stopped and searched than white people.[3] Hence, although it was widely claimed that the 2011 riots were not 'race' riots – because they were not dominated by one ethnic group in particular – the Runnymede Trust stresses the need to be careful about dismissing race relations and inequalities and to further investigate the role played by them in the events (Nwabuzo 2012: 20). In fact, they consider the explanations given by the media, the MET and politicians themselves at best incomplete. This is the reason why, in their report, they give voice to those who were directly involved in the riots, noting the ways in which racial injustice has acted as a driver for the riots. To this extent, they even quote the Scarman report, that highlighted the presence of problems of racial disadvantage at the heart of the disturbances; indeed, Lord Scarman stated that white people as well as black people contributed to the violence that erupted at the time, and recommended to tackle racial discrimination to prevent further outbursts in the future (Scarman 1981). In this view, they claim that unless the British society starts taking concerted action against racial inequalities, periods of financial austerity will always be at risk of sparking further disturbances in the near future.

In the aftermath of the civil unrest, according to the Runnymede Trust, the condemnation of the rioters' misdeeds was followed by some reluctance in understanding why it had happened. The Trust therefore launched a project, the *Runnymede Riot Roundtables Project*, bringing together young people and members of the local communities, activists, experts, researchers, local councillors and police officers, in the attempt to provide "an alternative narrative for why the civil disturbances occurred" (Nwabuzo 2012: 3).[4]

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[3] Similarly, Asian people complain to have been subjected to a sort of persecution after the Terrorism Act legislation was adopted in the wake of the London bombings. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-24902389 .

[4] The project was carried out by adopting a variety of methods including roundtables (held in Birmingham, Bradford, Coventry, Croydon and Lewisham) and interviews with young researchers (trained in three research methods: focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and documentary photography), with the aim

The first element on which the report concentrates is the emphasis given by politicians to gangs as the prime suspects in the disturbances. In a speech given to the House of Commons on August 11th, David Cameron emphasized that at the heart of all the violence sat the issue of the street gangs (Cameron 2011b); similarly, the Home Secretary Theresa May stated that gangs were obviously involved (Home Affairs Committee 2011). After the initial claims according to which as many as 28% of those arrested in London were gang members, the Home Office revised public figures on gang involvement to 19%, and dropped them to 13% countrywide (Home Office 2011: 5). Further investigation then suggested that, while gang members were certainly present in the disturbances, they did not orchestrate or control the riots. They actually suspended ordinary hostilities to fight with a common enemy: police. What researchers uncovered through their roundtables and interviews was that such a focus on gangs involvement in politicians' speeches and declarations was subliminally inflected with elements of a racialised discourse, since "not every black person is in a gang but every gang has a black person" (Nwabuzo 2012: 14). In other words, despite the fact that the term 'gang' can refer to both black and white people, it is not a racially neutral term; indeed, young black criminality is often associated with stereotypical images of gang membership (Sveinsson 2012).

The extensive coverage of the social unrest given by the mainstream media – together with the flow of information exchanged through social networks – has privileged some controversial representations of the rioters. In some cases, a narrative demonizing black culture (and Jamaican culture in particular) was voiced, foregrounding racial connotations. Many commentators have traced a direct line from Margaret Thatcher's infamous remarks about (white British) people fearing being 'swamped by an alien culture' (in the run-up to the 1979 elections) to the royalist and conservative historian David Starkey's claims about the 2011 riots being partially the result of white youths becoming black. In an interview appeared on *Newsnight* (12/08/11), he stated that "a particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic gangster culture has become the fashion, and black and white boys and girls operate in this language together." He then went on clarifying what he meant by 'this language': "This language which is wholly false, which is this Jamaican patois that has been intruded in England and that is why so many of us have this sense of a foreign

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of offering a safe space for interviewees to be honest in their replies. The meetings and interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the Runnymede Trust.

country."[5] While linking the riots to the way some *young* people may choose to speak – tackling the whole question again in terms of 'us' and 'them' – he further stresses the fact that it is not about skin colour, it is about culture: white people having adopted a black culture, then overtly relating black culture to criminality and gangs. Despite the large number of critics reckoning his generalizations were offensive and based on no evidence, others have also identified black culture and its main forms of expression as a cause for the riots. From the pages of the *Daily Mirror*, for instance, journalist and political correspondent Paul Routledge blamed "the pernicious culture of hatred around rap music, which glorifies violence and loathing of authority (especially the police but including parents), exalts trashy materialism and raves about drugs" (*Daily Mirror*, 10/08/11). Rap music was thus blamed for encouraging violence in general and the unrest that erupted in August 2011, in particular.[6]

Such essentialist positions around (black) culture seem to explicitly entail racist ideologies that are conveyed through dominant discourses on race and crime, adopting a paradigm that continues to code cultural difference along 'biological race' lines (Gilroy 2004b). Biological determinism and an unchanging idea of the nation state have always fuelled anxiety and fears over the difficulties and controversies involved in maintaining a cultural and biological purity in response to the unsettling effects of everyday encounters with difference. In Gilroy's words (1995: 4):

> [t]hough it is seldom openly acknowledged, […] in Europe these telling arguments over culture and difference and the relationship of nationality to power and history re-animate the lingering after-images of the colonial and imperial past. The residual significance of these fading outlines on the retina of the national imaginary is signalled by too many sullen responses to the supposedly disruptive presence of post-colonial peoples at the conflictual core of metropolitan social life. For critics and other brave souls prepared to navigate the roughest waters of contemporary cultural politics, that half-forgotten imperial history is still present and potent, though it remains latent, mostly unseen, like rocks beneath the surface of the sea.

Today's conflicts and diseases within society seem to be deeply connected to dormant calls and invocations for purity that are intertwined with a patriotic rhetoric promoting sameness.

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[5] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14513517 .

[6] In other words, even the mere focus on rap music and gang culture seemed to have been subliminally inflected with elements of racialised discourses.

Despite – or maybe because of – the complexity of such hot and tricky questions, according to the Runnymede Trust report, as the riots spread "the media coverage shifted away from issues around race and the police and focused on the looting and criminal aspects of the disturbances", thus maximising the divide between the law-abiding people and the criminal looters (Nwabuzo 2012: 15). Several commentators have suggested that the riots were a symptom of the fact that there was something really wrong in the British society, if rioters smashed their own communities and neighbourhoods. After the 1980s Brixton riots, the country had hoped for a regeneration of the most deprived areas (not only in London but also in other cities across England) and a reappraisal of police especially in black communities. Unfortunately, two decades later, in 2001, many of the same issues were mentioned again in the official report on the riots that occurred in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley.[7] Indeed, the Cantle report (that was commissioned by the Home Secretary, at the time David Blunkett, after the riots, and written by the former chief executive of Nottingham City Council, Ted Cantle) found that some regeneration schemes had actually made the situation worse – forcing communities to compete against each other, which generated further anger and resentment based on a polarisation of segregated communities. The report shed light on the fact that, in many cases, people never mixed with communities of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, thus living parallel lives. In this view, Cantle explicitly urged politicians, community leaders and the media to promote a meaningful concept of citizenship (Cantle 2001) to break all forms of segregation and encourage community cohesion. However, such hints were not taken since, still in 2011, the British society proved to suffer from some kind of *malaise* deriving from unsolved problems.

While acknowledging the different viewpoints emerging on such an intricate and sensitive topic, also accepting the assumption according to which the extent of the criminal damage and the violence that erupted made it difficult to spot the causes behind the disturbances, it is worth noting that the general public saw the incidents through the lens provided by the media. Chapter Four of this book provides detailed corpus findings on the main construals of the participants to the 2011 riots as emerging from the newspapers under investigation. Whether or not the 'race' issue was too quickly dismissed, there are indisputable factors relating to ethnicity and social disadvantage among the reasons why the riots sparked,

[7] The Bradford riots occurred in July 2001 as a result of the tensions between the large and growing British Asian community and the white majority, which escalated in harsh clashes between the Anti-Nazi League and far right groups like the British National Party and the National Front.

which partly concern the fact that a black man was killed by police and partly concern the fact that the riots took place in areas where there was a majority of ethnic groups and a strong sense of harassment by the police (with black people being thirty times more likely to be stopped and searched by the MET).[8]

In the wake of such factors, another important point emerging from the report should also be noted: the links between the riots and the wider social inequalities were not thoroughly explored, at least by the great majority of the politicians and the media, with the exception of those holding more liberal views, who expectedly encouraged a more in-depth analysis of the events and the reasons that led to them. To such extent, it is worth mentioning the left-leaning newspaper *The Guardian* (whose sociological enquiry *Reading the Riots* will be introduced in the next paragraph) and, within the national debate, the Labour Opposition leader Ed Miliband who argued that "both culture and deprivation matter. To explain is not to excuse. But to refuse to explain is to condemn to repeat" (Miliband 2011).

1.3 Reading the riots from a sociological perspective

Since, unlike the 1980s riots, there was no Scarman-style inquiry into the causes of the 2011 events, a series of gaps actually remained in the public understanding of the disturbances, which led *The Guardian* and the Social Policy Department of the London School of Economics (LSE) to carry out a sociological investigation into the rioters' motivations. As a unique collaboration between a newspaper and a university, the aim of the *Reading the Riots* study – that was defined as a landmark study – was to conduct high-quality social research, affecting the public and the political debate on the motivations of those who rioted, contributing with "solid evidence" to amend the existing information gap (Newburn *et al.* 2011: 8). More specifically, it is the only study into the riots to include almost 600 in-depth interviews with people who had personal experiences in the disturbances and their aftermath. Above all, the project tries to leave nobody unheard, drawing on perspectives from all sides, ranging from people who ransacked department stores and shops, to victims who lost their homes, and police officers who risked their lives in the clashes. In its attempt to explain why the civil disorder spread across England, it was

[8] Data from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) reported by *The Guardian* - http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/jun/12/police-stop-and-search-black-people .

inspired by a study on the Detroit riots that occurred in 1967 in the United States, involving the *Detroit Free Press* newspaper and the Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

Among the first elements to be uncovered was the view according to which the immediate and strict moralism that characterised most of the media and political positions on the 2011 UK riots – and that described rioters and looters as 'scum' – almost left no space for a meaningful political debate on the causes of the events. However, as Mary Evans (centennial professor in gender studies at the LSE) has highlighted:

> Thinking about causes is an idea that seems to be vanishing out of the collective consciousness of many in the media and politics. There is not much dispute that people should not have to jump for their lives from burning buildings or that people should not steal. That is the easy bit. It is doing the difficult thing – and being prepared to think about why these things happened – that seems to have vanished. […] Refusing the possibility of explanation, let alone understanding, empties politics of everything except a crude form of moralism. This moralism can only see the world and its inhabitants as good or evil, the 'scum' who need to be swept from the street […]. Suddenly a whole new kind of sub-human person is created: a person whose greed or anger or avarice takes on a uniquely dangerous social form. Conflating our general fears with political rhetoric that denies legitimacy to effective dissent causes us to neglect identifying the causes of things and ignore connections and continuities within the social world (LSE Public Policy Group 2012: 6).

In this view, an investigation into the motivations of the rioters' (mis)deeds seemed not only desirable but also necessary to avoid easy judgements and widespread hysteria.

The *Reading the Riots* study began with confidential interviews with 270 people who were directly involved in the riots and were therefore responsible for the disorders in London, Birmingham, Nottingham, Manchester, Salford, Liverpool. In more details, 79% of the interviewees were male and 21% female, almost 30% were juveniles aged between 10 and 17, while 49% were aged 18-25. In terms of self-identified ethnicity, 47% were black, 26% were white, 17% mixed race or other, and 5% Asian. Given this sample of rioters, qualitative interviews were carried out especially in the communities – in a variety of locations, from homes and youth clubs to cafes and fast food restaurants – and, in a small number of cases, in prison (when the interviewed people were convicted of riot-related offences).

In the first phase, that was completed in three months and published in December 2011, a qualitative framework was adopted, involving in-depth,

free-flowing interviews with people who had been involved in the riots. Researchers were recruited on the basis of their skills in interviewing and their good links with the communities that were affected by the riots; the selected team of 30 researchers were then trained in September and spent October in the interviewing process. Since in the initial phase the focus was on people who had engaged in violence, looting, arson, and attacks on the police, interviewers had to face the difficult task to "persuade potential interviewees that it was valuable and safe to talk about their experiences", and the task was even more challenging considering that the police were still making arrests and raids, so concern about anonymity was very high. The second phase (published in July 2012) involved more than 300 interviews with a variety of people affected by the riots, including 130 police officers, court officials, magistrates, 30 defence lawyers, 25 Crown Prosecution Service lawyers, and judges. Interviews were facilitated by police forces who either selected candidates for the study or offered their staff a chance to participate in the project. They were all granted the option of anonymity and encouraged to speak freely (although a MET press officer was required to be present during interviews). Additionally, 40 victims who had lost their businesses or homes were also interviewed as part of the research.

Interviewers had to follow a specific methodological approach: they were given a topic guide covering the main themes that had to be tackled with interviewees, finding out "how people first heard about the riots, how they became involved, how they communicated, what they did, why they thought the riots stopped and how they felt about their actions" (Newburn *et al.* 2011: 11). The questions, that were deliberately neutral, tended to last about 45 minutes, and provided first-person accounts of the respondents' experiences and viewpoints. Interviewees were also asked survey-style questions dealing, for instance, with their thoughts on the civil disorder and their attitudes towards police. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and stored in a database, resulting in more than 1.3m words collected. In November, a team of five researchers recruited at the LSE began the analysis of the qualitative data. The analytical team held a view according to which the key themes should be allowed to emerge directly from the data. So each transcript was read (by more than one analyst) and coded after its main themes and sub-themes could be identified and evidenced. The relationships between the many themes were constantly updated and displayed on a thematic map document providing the analytical team with a larger, overall picture.

What emerged most strongly from the interviews held during the first phase is that the civil unrest mainly spread as a result of the long-burning