

SHOPPING FOR FREE? LOOTING, CONSUMERISM AND THE 2011 RIOTS

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A number of commentators have suggested that the riots in England in August 2011 were distinctive because of the character and extent of the looting that took place. In doing so, they have argued that the nature of modern consumer capitalism should be placed front and centre of any explanation of the disorder. While concurring with elements of such arguments, we depart from such analyses in three ways. First, we argue that it is important not to overstate the extent to which the 2011 riots were a departure from previous outbreaks of civil disorder—violent consumerism having a quite lengthy history. Second, using testimony from those involved, we argue that a focus on looting risks ignoring both the political character and the violence involved in the riots. Finally, and relatedly, we suggest that the focus on consumption potentially simplifies the nature of the looting itself by underestimating its political and expressive characteristics.

Keywords: riots, disorder, looting, consumerism, political violence

Introduction

In this article, we explore the place of ‘looting’ within major public disorder and, in particular, within the August 2011 riots in England. The 2011 riots, the last significant outbreak of ‘rioting’ in England, involved all of the forms of behaviour most commonly associated with such disorder: attacks on police and property, significant levels of violence, damage to buildings—both residential and commercial—arson attacks and very considerable levels of theft—from individuals, but mainly from shops. It is the latter—the systematic theft of goods from shops in times of serious civil unrest—that is the primary focus of concern here. In part, this is because the social scientific literature on this subject is relatively slight. There is a very considerable body of extant work on riots and civil disorder (see, for example, [Waddington 2002](#)) but, within that, the attention paid to what is commonly referred to as ‘looting’ is not very extensive. The more substantive reason for our focus here is to challenge some of the extant analyses of the place of looting in the 2011 English riots. In particular, we draw attention to two forms of reductionism that, in our view, appear in such accounts. The first concerns the claims, by some, that the nature and extent of the looting that occurred during the 2011 English riots was the primary distinguishing characteristic of the disorder. We argue that the consequence of such a view is to reduce the complexity of the rioting by focusing on looting at the expense of other elements of the disorder, in particular the elements of politics and protest. Second, such analyses understandably tend to identify contemporary consumer culture as the primary source of motivational energy behind the looting. Important though consumerism must undoubtedly be in any comprehensive analysis of the looting in the 2011 riots, it is important not to ignore its political and expressive characteristics.

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Understanding 'Looting'

Despite its relatively common appearance during rioting and other forms of emergency, the literature on 'looting' is relatively slim, being confined in the main to studies of such activity in the context of (civil) war. The term itself has military roots (Dynes and Quarantelli 1968), first appearing in the early 19th century, and generally being used to refer to the taking of property by force by invading armies, usually in circumstances where the 'owners' were unable or unwilling to defend it. The term 'looting' tends to be used loosely to refer to a 'wide range of activities that differ markedly in terms of the degree of organization, societal level of operation, scale and object' (Mac Ginty 2004). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a series of core characteristics. First, and most obviously, looting involves the *appropriation* of goods. Second, looting is differentiated from straightforward theft or other forms of appropriation by the *particular circumstances* in which it takes place. This wider setting is generally one in which there exists a major challenge to the rule of law, most usually: civil emergencies/disasters, (civil) war and riot or disorder. In each of these cases, for differing reasons, daily life is very significantly disrupted and this disturbance tends to pose enormous challenges to the police and other emergency services (potentially the military also). It is within such a breakdown in controls that appropriation tends to become defined as 'looting'.

The third general characteristic of looting (as opposed to theft in other circumstances for example) is that it is a *collective* activity. Looting, by and large, is something undertaken by groups of people, not isolated individuals. Fourth, and relatedly, the occurrence of looting is generally and, relatively speaking, something that is *widespread*, particularly during riots. Quarantelli's (1994) comparative analysis suggests that looting is much less widespread during disasters than that during riots, not least because there is less popular support for such activity in the aftermath of disaster. This in turn helps explain the nature of the fifth characteristic of looting in this context: that it is *public*.¹ During riots, given the 'breakdown' in law and order, there is a much-reduced need for those involved to be clandestine. Indeed, looting is often done in a remarkably open and public manner—almost as an act of display. Again, the context is crucial, for in addition to serious challenges to the rule of law there tends to be significantly less (local) public censure of looting than there would be for commercial burglary or theft committed under other circumstances. *Looting*, for our purposes here, then, we take to be 'the widespread appropriation of goods in the context of wider civil disorder, undertaken by sizeable numbers of people, often in a highly public manner'.

A Consumerist Riot?

Journalists, politicians and academics have all pursued the idea that the scale and nature of the looting during the 2011 disorder was its signally distinctive characteristic. The *Guardian* journalist, Zoe Williams, for example, writing on what turned out to be the last day of full-scale disorder, described them as 'shopping riots', that were 'characterised by their consumer choices: that's the bit we've never seen before' (Williams 2011). In a similar vein in an article penned in the immediate aftermath of the disorder the Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, argued for a strong criminal justice response to

¹ In drawing this contrast, Quarantelli (1994) describes looting during disasters as generally being 'very limited, individual and private'.

the disorder and blamed the riots on what he termed a ‘feral underclass, cut off from the mainstream in everything *but its materialism*’ (Clarke 2011; emphasis added). This argument has been developed most extensively by academics. Moxon (2011), in a relatively early sociological commentary on the disorder, for example, suggested that:

... rather than signalling any breakdown of society or any pathology on the part of the rioters, the events of August actually represented conformity to the underlying values of consumer culture, and showed how far the diktats of that culture have been internalised by the participants.

Undoubtedly the most substantive academic treatment of this issue is an article by Treadwell *et al.* (2013). They describe the events in London after the shooting of Mark Duggan as ‘destructive outbursts in which the protest was lost, or at least buried beneath the subjective motivations of those who, as the forces of law and order retreated, *saw the opportunity to do some free shopping*’ (Treadwell *et al.* 2013: 1, emphasis added). Consumer culture, Treadwell *et al.* argue, supplied the young men involved ‘with a compelling motivation to join the rioting’ and they use the phrase ‘aggravated shopping’ to describe much of the disorder (2013: 1). A ‘consumerist motivation’ is described as having been ubiquitous among those they interviewed—‘all respondents offer[ing] similar accounts’ (2013: 7):

These consumer drives dominated the rioters’ reality because *nothing else* existed—neither a transcendental ideal, nor a politicized dialectical struggle, nor resentment against state authority—that might win their hearts. The brief yet total breakdown of law and order could lead to nothing more substantial than an armful of consumer items that could be sold for less than their value or retained in order to bolster the ornamental identity of the self. (Treadwell *et al.* 2013: 7, emphasis added)

Their argument is that these were fundamentally ‘consumer riots that contained no oppositional substance and appeared to endorse today’s pervasive consumer capitalist ideology in the most brazen terms’ (2013: 8). Treadwell *et al.* (2013) are by no means the only academics making this general argument. In fact, the links between the rioting and consumer culture had been widely commented upon in the immediate aftermath of the disorder, including by the Guardian/LSE study, Reading *the Riots*, that forms the basis for this article (see Rogers 2011; Topping and Bawdon 2011). Bauman (2011; 2012) was an influential early commentator on the events of August 2011, suggesting that they should be seen not as bread or hunger riots (like their 19th-century predecessors) but rather as the demonstrable actions of ‘defective’ or ‘flawed consumers’:

For defective consumers, those contemporary have-nots, non-shopping is the jarring and festering stigma of a life un-fulfilled – and of own [sic] nonentity and good-for-nothingness. Not just the absence of pleasure: absence of human dignity. (Bauman 2011)

These ‘collateral casualties of consumerism’ are disqualified from consideration as ‘fully-fledged, right and proper’ members of society by having failed the core social norm of ‘consumer competence’ or aptitude (Bauman 2007). In a slightly expanded version of his arguments, Bauman (2012) argued that the 2011 riots were created by a combination of consumerism and rising social inequality. As such, they were not political—in the sense of seeking change—but, rather, were a misguided and doomed ‘attempt to join, if only for a fleeting moment, the ranks of consumers from which they have been excluded’ (2012: 11).

Treadwell *et al.* (2013) distance themselves somewhat from Bauman's interpretation of the disorder though their arguments have many parallels. They dispute the idea that the rioters were 'failed' or 'flawed consumers', arguing that their respondents were actually entirely committed to modern consumer capitalism and were resolved 'not to appear flawed and disqualified' (2013: 8). These resource-poor consumers, they suggest, were furnished with a brief opportunity to act in ways that illustrated the 'grab-what-you-can ethic that pervades Western consumer societies' (2013: 10). This, they further suggest, can be seen as something of a contrast with what they view as the failure of some of the 'early empirical accounts' of the riots to penetrate down to 'a deeper level of attitudes, beliefs, motivations and material realities associated with marginalised populations' (2013: 12).

In what follows we pursue three general lines of argument. First, while accepting the possibility that something distinctive and different was on show in the 2011 riots, we argue that it is important not to overstate this given that violent consumerism, often on a significant scale, has arguably been a standard feature of much rioting in the last half century. Second, while accepting that violent consumerism was a very significant feature of the riots, we dispute the idea that, in essence, 'nothing else existed' and argue that such a stance risks underplaying both the political character of, and the extent of, the violence involved in the riots (see Newburn 2015). Finally, building on earlier literature that focuses specifically on looting, we argue that beyond being an expression of contemporary consumerist values such conduct ought to be seen as a form of 'political violence'.

Looting and Riots

Treadwell *et al.* (2013: 13) rightly observe that 'it would be naïve to suggest that looting and theft were "new" features of urban disorder'. Nevertheless, some accounts have implied that the 2011 riots represented something of a departure from rioting in earlier decades and, given this, we consider it important to place the violent consumerism that occurred in its recent historical context.

In the major urban disorders in 1960s United States, looting was so regular an occurrence that it was characterised as having the status of an established 'group response pattern' (Quarantelli and Dynes 1970: 169) and as 'semi-institutionalized' (Quarantelli and Dynes 1970: 178). Of the 189 major incidents that had occurred between 1964 and 1969 in the United States, a significant element of looting featured in at least 122, and over 60,000 people were arrested for such activity. Moreover, the more general thesis that many rioters are in it simply 'for fun and profit' (Banfield 1970) itself dates back to at least the American ghetto riots of that era. As is the case in the United States, there is plentiful evidence that rioting in the United Kingdom in every decade from the 1980s onwards has regularly been accompanied by a significant element of looting. Here, for example, Lord Scarman describes the disorder on Saturday 11 April in Brixton in 1981 where:

...widespread looting had developed since about 6pm. Both whites and blacks – some of them were very young – were involved. To several witnesses, the whites appeared to be generally older, and more systematic in their methods. It also appears that the looters were, in the main, quite different from the people who were attacking the police in Railton Road. Several witnesses had the impression that

many of the looters came from outside Brixton, and were simply taking advantage of the disorders for their own criminal purposes. (Scarman 1982: 59)

During the 1981 Brixton riot, it is estimated that nearly 150 premises were damaged, 28 of them by fire. Once again, as had been the case in the American ‘race riots’ of the 1960s (Tierney 1994), the targets were far from randomly chosen: ‘Predictably, suppliers of consumer durables (particularly clothes, shoe and electrical equipment shops) and off-licences proved favourites. However, shops owned by popular local figures in Railton Road escaped unscathed’ (Keith 1993: 101). Metropolitan Police data indicate that around one third of all the arrests resulting from the Brixton disorder was for theft or damage to property (Keith 1993). The pattern was the same elsewhere (Field and Southgate 1982; Home Office 1982). Similar reports of extensive looting can be found in subsequent civil disturbances including those in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool in 1985, in Newcastle in 1991 (Campbell 1993) and in the Lozells riot in Birmingham in 2005 (King 2009). In Handsworth in Birmingham in 1985, the rioting resulted in 45 shops being looted and burned and 236 people convicted of offences linked to looting. With more than an echo of some of the reports from the 2011 disorder, a local newspaper reported a police log at the time of the Handsworth riot saying that ‘An air of excitement is noticeable among the looters – one man pushing a trolley-load of stolen property shouts ‘I’m shopping early for Christmas.’²

What should we conclude from this? First, that looting is *usual*. It is a regular occurrence within civil disorder (Tilly 2003), particularly in the later stages of rioting. Second, it is often *widespread*. While some riots will feature isolated outbreaks of looting, it is far from unusual for such activity to be very extensive indeed. Third, looting often involves a quite *targeted* form of consumption. That is to say, a pattern to the looting is often visible, with particular types of location, or particular goods, being the focus of the looters’ attention. We return to this later in the article. On one level, therefore, what occurred during the 2011 England riots is an illustration of a long-established trend in major civil violence. The next step is to look in a little more detail at the events of 2011.

Looting and the 2011 Riots

Predictably given the scale and geographical spread of the disorder, it is difficult to offer an entirely accurate overview of the looting that occurred. There are a number of data sources, and even though they tend to measure different things (‘incidents’, arrests, cases proceeding to court), they can nevertheless be used to construct a moderately reliable picture of what went on. About one third (1,649 or 33 per cent) of the 5,000 or more criminal incidents that occurred during the riots were burglaries (Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012). Other analyses have suggested that at least 50 per cent of recorded offences in the riots were acquisitive in nature (e.g. HMIC 2011), though they fail to explain how this total is calculated. Data from the Ministry of Justice reporting the progress of cases arising from the riots through the criminal courts in the year after the disorder found 50 per cent of all first hearings to be cases of burglary,

² *Birmingham Mail*, ‘From the archives: Police parking ticket sowed seeds for the riots’, <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/from-the-archives-police-parking-ticket-sowed-157800> (last accessed 17 January 2014). The phrase is remarkably similar to that uttered by one of the *Reading the Riots* respondents, who said ‘It was like Christmas’. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/05/summer-riots-consumerist-feast-looters> (last accessed 18 February 2014).

a further 15 per cent to be theft and 2 per cent robbery. On the surface, therefore, two thirds of cases that had reached at least a first hearing were acquisitive in nature. However, such data signify what was recorded, or what was pursued via arrest and prosecution, rather than measuring in any direct way the activities of the rioters themselves. Second, as we describe in more detail later, there are ‘blurred boundaries’ between the different forms of conduct criminalized during riots, and in many cases, rioters will have been arrested for one type of offence but have actually been involved in numerous others (disorder, violence, criminal damage and theft).

The significance of looting within the events of August 2011 varied geographically and over time—generally becoming more visible in the third and fourth days of the rioting. It appears—taken as a proportion of all the recorded offences in a particular area—that the disorder in London on the third day was most dominated by looting (Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012). In some areas, some of the time, rioting was dominated by acquisitive crime, whereas in other places, a very different picture emerges. In Liverpool, for example, where rioters were prevented from reaching the city centre, three quarters of offences were criminal damage. In both Nottingham and Salford, the core of the rioting involved attacks on the police, and on police stations, and very little in the way of ‘looting’ was reported. Figure 1 illustrates the significant variations between areas.

Overall, the general data available confirm that looting was very extensive—possibly more extensive than occurred even during the rioting in 1981 and 1985. But the data also remind us that much else occurred within the context of the disorder: violence—including the loss of life—intimidation, arson and criminal damage. We argue, consequently, that a broadening of the explanatory focus beyond consumerism is required and that this holds not just for the riots but also for the looting itself. Centrally, this involves the recognition that ‘looting’ is not an undifferentiated set of activities but rather a set of social acts capable of harbouring multiple meanings, motivations and understandings. The next step, therefore, is to examine this aspect of the 2011 riots from the perspective of the rioters themselves.

Motivations and Meanings

Academic writing has approached the subject of rioting in widely contrasting ways. Where early psychological analysis focused on what was taken to be the fundamental irrationality of ‘the crowd’ (Le Bon 1986; Tarde 1903), more recent scholarship, both psychological and sociological (e.g. Reicher 1984; Waddington and King 2005), has paid much greater attention to the attitudes, views and accounts given by rioters themselves. In line with recent scholarship, the approach adopted here is based primarily on the analysis of interviews with participants in the rioting. The data utilized in what follows were gathered from a research study called *Reading the Riots*, which was established and run jointly by the *Guardian* and the LSE. It had two phases, the first focusing on the rioters themselves, the second looked more broadly at the criminal justice response to the riots. In the first phase, 270 people involved in the riots were interviewed—people from London, Birmingham, Manchester, Salford, Liverpool and Nottingham who admitted to having taken part in the riots and, in the vast majority of cases, having not been arrested. In semi-structured, open-ended qualitative research interviews, lasting

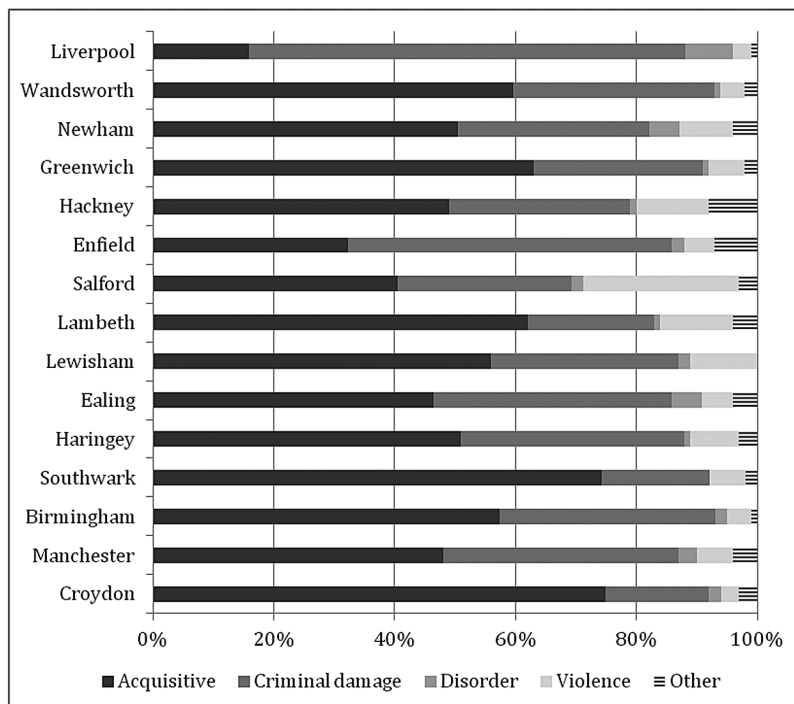


FIG. 1 Disorder-related crime by local authority area, by type of crime. Source: adapted from Home Office (2011).

usually between 40 and 90 minutes, and subsequently fully transcribed and analysed, they were asked about their involvement in the disorder, including what actions they had taken, how long their participation had extended, their perceptions, feelings and motivations, together with a small number of questions about themselves.

There are a number of difficulties of interpretation involved in the analysis of such material. On the one hand, there is danger of over-rationalizing conduct, reading into participants' testimony a set of political or other motives that, even if present, are far from the entire explanation for the events concerned. In this context, Rock (1981: 19–20) has observed that there are occasions when 'it is as if riots cannot be innocent of profound meaning... very few have proposed that riots are not invariably intended to convey sober meaning and political lessons'. On the other hand, but relatedly, such interpretive inquiry must constantly be alive to the possibility that participants may be influenced by a desire to rationalize their behaviour—to utilize what, in other circumstances, have been referred to as 'techniques of neutralization' (Sykes and Matza 1957).

The core aim of the research was to delve into the perspectives and understandings of the riots held by those who took part. Given this, the complexity of the data, and the interpretive challenges outlined above, an inductive and grounded approach was adopted, avoiding the application of pre-defined codes and categories, such as in content analysis. While an element of deductive analysis was introduced at a later stage, it was an inductive thematic approach to coding, undertaken iteratively by an analytical

team, and which focused on identifying themes that emerged from the transcripts. Much care was given to ensure that the analysis was rigorous and any potential bias reduced. As already outlined, the themes themselves were generated inductively from the transcripts rather than being based on the preconceptions of either the analysts or others in the *Reading the Riots* research team. Working as a group also allowed greater reliability in identifying themes: all themes not only came from the data but were also discussed by all analysts and agreed upon, reducing the bias that can be found in the interpretation of any one researcher. In our view, the themes and issues outlined below, derived from careful, systematic analysis of the largest data set collected on the 2011 riots, illustrate elements of the complex character of 'looting' and point to a similarly complex mosaic of motivations underpinning such conduct.

Looting and consumption

Our core argument is that there is more to understanding the motivations of those involved in the 2011 riots than can be captured by consumer culture. That said, as indicated above, it would be absurd to deny the role of consumerist values in informing and motivating elements of the conduct visible in August 2011 and, indeed, the early-published results of *Reading the Riots* described the events as a 'consumerist feast' (Topping and Bawdon 2011) and recounted in detail the search for designer labels, electronic goods and other commodities found in the modern temples of capitalism. Indeed, a large number of our respondents talked in great detail about the material motivations underlying their involvement in the looting; some appearing close to Bauman's notion of 'disqualified' or 'flawed' consumers, others much less so. Reflecting both contemporary consumer capitalist values and 'its imaginary social hierarchy' (Treadwell *et al.* 2013: 14), the following respondent, an 18-year old from London, described the fleeting experience of high-end consumption (he was unable to keep the car) he'd enjoyed after having hot-wired and stolen a BMW X6:

It was just nice, like, nice like, felt good, it felt good, like things that you can't have, things that you never had until this moment...I don't know if I'm gonna have any future, but it was a good, wonderful experience. I felt how rich was meant to be, I felt how to be rich! It feels good having better cars than certain people...

Consumerist values were perhaps most conspicuously evident in the shops that were targeted during the riots. Data collected by the Home Office and analysed by the *Guardian* found there to have been a total of 2,278 commercial premises targeted by rioters during the August 2011 disorder. Of these 61 per cent were retail premises. Twelve per cent were electrical shops (electrical hardware, mobile phones, DVDs/CDs and computer equipment), 10 per cent were clothing shops (including sportswear retailers) and a further 10 per cent were restaurants, cafes and fast food outlets.³ Argos was the shop most regularly looted followed by Tesco, Curry's and JD Sports. For some rioters, and replicating youthful consumption more generally (Latham 2002), it was all about the labels:

People with the Ralph, the Gucci, the Nike, the trainers, the Air Forces; it's all style, just everyone wants it. If you don't have it, you're just going to look like an idiot. (15-year-old female, London)

³ Of the remainder, 9 per cent were independent retailers, 8 per cent supermarkets, 4 per cent jewellers, 7 per cent bookmakers, 3 per cent pubs and 3 per cent were hair and beauty salons.

All of sudden, this young woman from Clapham found herself confronted with the best form of summer sales—everything available with no price tag:

There was some trainers I wanted to buy from JD [sports], some white ones, and I was thinking I can go inside and get them. So I just went inside and got them...then once you do it and nothings happened, you're like, 'oh my gosh!' and you're like, 'this is a once in a lifetime thing and you're going to get everything you want for free'. Everyone was like, 'Christmas came early' then we all just going into any shop we want

Ever since [Thompson's \(1971\)](#) identification of the 'moral economy' of the 18th-century crowd, analyses have shown that the targets of rioting are often far from random. This was similarly true of the looting in 2011, with some of the structuring of such activity being a consequence of the influence of particular consumer cravings—which goods were especially desired and valued—but also being a more general reflection of what [Stott and Reicher \(1998: 512\)](#) refer to as the 'ideologically defined identities assumed by crowd members'. [Reicher \(1984\)](#) in his study of the 1980 St Pauls riot illustrated how such social identities developed and acted as a guide to collective behaviour and provided criteria for legitimate action. Though the 2011 riots took place over a much more extended time period, across a greater number and more diverse geographical territories, and were consequently much more complex than the St Pauls riot, similar structuring can arguably be seen. Some of this, as argued, was to do with identification with the values of contemporary consumer capitalism, but there is also evidence that the pattern of looting—and quite definite patterns were identifiable in what is often portrayed as entirely chaotic ([Baudains et al. 2013](#))—sometimes reflected affinities with particular locations—'it didn't kick off in Kilburn High Road... [because] we looked after our people here and we were trying to say hold it down' (Male, 50s, north London)—or distinctions between businesses that were considered to be on or off limits. In the following exchange, two interviewees (18- and 19-year-old males from south London) discuss the choices they felt were being made:

A:...cos Waterstones never got touched (laughs with other interviewee) no-one want to get books (laughing).... A lot of places didn't get touched

B:If you had alcohol in your shop you were getting touched... electronics in your shop... Although the shop next to KFC didn't get touched because everyone knows the man... Because the shop keeper in that shop is like is very cool. Everyone likes him so his shop never got touched at all. Other than that... designer clothes that people wanna get, trainers. No-one went in the charity shop

Looting, at heart, is of course about the appropriation of goods and for many of our respondents, like those interviewed by [Treadwell et al. \(2013: 7\)](#), looting 'represented an opportunity to advance the consumer and financial interests of the self'. But it was not all about the right labels, flat-screen TVs, new trainers or the latest mobile phones. For some it was a fleeting opportunity—during what [James \(2000\)](#) has called a 'moral holiday'—to supplement a meagre existence. Describing themselves as (relatively) poor, many of the rioters drew attention to the cuts, to austerity policies more generally and to declining opportunities. In among those looting from JD Sports, Currys and Comet, there were numerous tales of people whose actions looked more like those of people on the bread-line exploiting an opportunity to get hold of basic goods they would otherwise struggle

to afford. The following male respondent, aged 18 and interviewed in prison, had been living in a hostel immediately prior to riots and had little or no money:

...like honestly I went, I wasn't going for, just to mash up the place...I wanted to get a few things, I wanted a bit of money... it sounds, it sounds wrong but I was going for like what I need. Like it wasn't just [to] be greedy, I was going for what I need, like. Certain little things...

And similarly, the following two reports, from Manchester and London, each appears to describe something far removed from the illicit equivalent of what Veblen (1899) described as 'conspicuous consumption':

I seen a young man come out of Lidl with one of these, you know, super packs of toilet roll, like a 40pack, and I was like, right well, they're not exactly stealing to make money, they're stealing to survive. Can't even afford toilet roll. (21-year-old male, Manchester)

I saw someone come out with these ten chickens from Sainsbury's and stuff like that. I see people coming out with chicken. I'm saying 'yo, these people are broke man'. I personally know certain people that took it as an opportunity to get things that they need to survive, for them and their kids. (21-year-old male, London)

Many respondents' accounts described how a lack of money dominated their lives, using words like 'surviving' to indicate their situation. One 18-year-old young man from Deptford in south London described his difficulty in meeting the basic costs of living in a hostel. After money for the room and bills he said 'I haven't got food to put in my fridge, see what I'm saying?' He went on to talk about his involvement in some of the looting during the riots, asserting that he was not 'greedy' and only took things that he really needed. The looting of essentials, such as toilet rolls, food and nappies was described by a number of respondents and was seen to be demonstrative of the relative poverty experienced by some involved in the disorder:

I heard there were a lot of, you know, Mums 'n' Dads who cant even afford to buy toilet roll so were sending their kids in to the Lidl before it got burnt down just to steal the bare necessities, if you like, toilet roll, fucking - excuse my language - you know, food, you know not robbing anything of particular value, just enough to survive. [21-year-old male, Manchester]

Though there may well be elements of *post hoc* rationalization in some of these accounts, we should not be surprised that for some, looting was a brief opportunity to make ends meet. All the available research—including *Reading the Riots*, the government's own Victims and Communities Panel, and the data produced by the Ministry of Justice and other government departments (Ministry of Justice 2012)—is consistent on this issue. They all make it quite clear that those involved in the riots came disproportionately from the poorest urban communities and, to use the justice secretary's phrase, felt themselves to be 'cut-off from the mainstream'. That said, in understanding looting consumerist drives and relative deprivation are still only part of the picture.

Opportunistic and exciting

Reflecting on analyses of the riots in the 1980s, Michael Keith (1993: 94) argued that what had been largely missing was a 'conception of *rioting* which captures the impromptu nature of events without reducing the actions of individuals to the behaviourist response

to an array of environmental stimuli. Such a description demands a notion of *spontaneity* that does not devalue the rationality of individuals yet at the same time conveys a notion of the social context in which such actions are situated'. In this connection, the accounts given by the vast majority of our respondents who were involved in the 2011 riots described actions that were, initially at least, largely unplanned and were in many respects the spontaneous actions of individuals suddenly freed from everyday constraints and confronted by opportunities for criminal appropriation usually unavailable.

As such their accounts are very much in contrast with some of the interpretations of the riots offered by politicians and police during and immediately after the disorder, not least those that focused on the role of 'gangs' and the pre-planning of organized or semi-organized 'criminals'. The Prime Minister, for example, argued that 'street gangs' were at the heart of the problems illustrated by the disorder and that there was evidence that such gangs had 'been behind the co-ordination of the attacks on the police and the looting that has followed' (Hansard, HC, 11 August 2011, cols 1053–54). In fact, evidence of the influence of gangs proved hard to find and official analyses of the riots and their aftermath, including those by the police service (see, for example, [Metropolitan Police Service 2012](#)), had little to say about the role of gangs in either the violence or looting.

None of this is to deny the fact that there were occasions during the rioting, particularly in the later days, when a degree of organization was evident, particularly where the looting was concerned. This respondent, an 18-year-old male from Birmingham, describes both the chaos and the organization present at one scene:

[It was] madness, like a free for all, people running in, you had like your groups of people that you could tell knew what they was doing, they were professional like, they were running in there, they had things in bags I think that they were using to rob...But then there was people that was just running in, grabbing anything, and running out.

Despite occasional accounts of organized looting, the bulk of the testimony received by *Reading the Riots* clearly indicated that much of this activity was opportunistic or impulsive. They had found themselves out on the streets for a variety of reasons: some simply to see what was happening, some to participate in the excitement and some primarily out of a desire to protest or to attack the police. In many ways, much of the looting was highly ritualized and non-utilitarian, with a sense of common purpose that helped to sustain the rioting and acted as a means of fostering and reinforcing the common 'social identity' of the crowd ([Reicher 1984](#)⁴). Only for a minority of those involved in looting was their original motivation—to the extent they were aware of, could remember, or could accurately articulate a motive—some general or specific desire to acquire material goods. A great many were simply taking advantage of an opportunity that presented itself and to be or become a part of an emergent 'community of temporary solidarity' ([Collins 2008](#): 251). In part, this was illustrated by an oft-expressed desire to help one another in these endeavours and to share the bounty that was appropriated from the shops. The following middle-aged man from Salford reported his experience as follows:

I actually found this iPod and as I picked it up this girl was looking at me and I just give it her. I actually even went into one of the shops right and I took a load of the cigarettes and I gave them to the

⁴ A similar sense of shared purpose is reported among the looters in other riots and perhaps most graphically in [Curvin and Porter's \(1979\)](#) account of the looting in the 1977 New York City blackout.

people when I came out I actually gave them to this old woman and that, I actually kept one packet for myself out of 14, but my intention wasn't going to loot the shop but it was going to get looted anyway...

A similar experience, involving the sharing out of stolen goods, was reported by this 19-year-old man in Birmingham:

[People were] throwing the phones in the air for everyone to have. They didn't just come out and take them all for themselves, they throw it in the air and give it to everyone. All day they pick up a phone yea and put it in their handbag.

In part the 'collective' nature of such activity was a reflection of the brief sense of freedom—a 'moral holiday'—that many experienced and which provided such a stark contrast with their everyday lives. Such activities were not, generally speaking, undertaken with much in the way of caution or any particular sense that they needed to hide. The looting was, as extant literature suggests, very public in character, often described by participants who felt a generalized sense of impunity. As one respondent, a 17-year-old male who had been involved in looting within the shopping centre in Wood Green in north London, put it, the experience was 'just so fast like whatever you wanted you could take, it was like a dream'. Or, in the words on this 18-year old from Manchester:

From where I was standing there was a certain group of people that just started setting the pace...and once one man's bust the window and gone in there. Everyone just follows innit, as with most things, it takes one person to set the pace and the rest'll follow and then it becomes a situation of looting.

The opportunistic, 'getting caught up in it all' nature of much of the looting was reinforced by a sense of excitement that pervaded many of the rioters' accounts. Intriguingly, given the very powerful emotions that would appear to be involved in rioting, academic studies have tended to pay relatively little attention to this aspect of disorder. One exception is Ray's (2014: 132) argument that looting is explicable in terms of a 'combination of factors linked together by the spatially situated experience of shame'. The accounts of the rioting given by the 270 respondents in this study are suffused, at least initially, with a sense of excitement, exhilaration and pleasure at what is happening and what is possible. Indeed, several used one of cultural criminology's favourite terms—carnival (Presdee 2001)—to describe what was happening and what they experienced. Perhaps not surprisingly given the breakdown of normal rules and expectations, the freedom briefly allowed by the chaos of the disorder, fuelled a sense of unbridled pleasure, notably at the absence of security.

I was just laughing because it was just hilarious like seeing people running out of shops with their hands full of clothes and getting to the shops and there was actually nobody there, no police officers no nothing. (19-year-old female, London)

The following young man from Birmingham describes the scene after he had stolen a number of mobile phones from a shop:

I got kinda happy, so I picked up a bag of phones and I ran outside and I threw it in the open air and was just like, "Phones!" and then they was just like, "Where, where, where?" I pointed at the bag, I got what I wanted and everyone just stormed the place... "Oi give me one, give me one, give me one".

Although there was a degree of instrumentality in the theft—often quite significant as we have acknowledged—the affective nature of much of the looting should not be ignored. Cultural criminologists have repeatedly urged us to pay attention to the phenomenology of crime—‘its adrenaline, its pleasure and panic, its excitement, and its anger, rage and humiliation, its desperation and its edgework’ (Young 2011: 84). All of these elements, from pleasure and panic to excitement and rage, played a prominent part in participants’ accounts of the rioting and, in particular, the looting. A chaotic, largely unplanned endeavour, fuelled by excitement and the thrill of transgression is in significant part what emerges from the rioters’ accounts. This sense of carnival was captured by the *Salford Star*:

This was more of a party than an angry riot, as youngsters handed old people packs of cigs, and tins of Carlsberg freshly liberated from LIDL ... all that was missing was the DJ. This was a very Salford riot. (*Salford Star*, 9 August 2011, quoted in Morrell *et al.* 2011)

Looting as political violence

Analysing looting primarily in the context of violent conflict, Mac Ginty (2004) argues strongly that we should consider it as a form of ‘political violence’. Both the idea that it is ‘political’ and ‘violent’ requires some elucidation, for to some looting may seem neither on the surface. Even if it does not involve violence directly, Mac Ginty argues, looting is ‘precipitated by direct or indirect violence’ (2004: 861)—this is the context within which law and order breaks down and the looting subsequently takes place. Or, as Randall Collins (2008: 245) puts it, ‘looting and destroying property is a relatively mild form of *violence* that arises within moral holidays when authority has broken down’ (emphasis added). Looting either requires violence or the threat of violence to take place. That is to say, the *context* of looting is violence. Over and above this, the centrality of violence to looting in the 2011 riots can be seen in a number of ways. Most obviously, by its very nature much of the looting required forced entry and therefore resulted in considerable damage to property. However, the damage inflicted on retail premises often went far beyond what was necessary to secure entry. Here a 46-year-old man describes what he saw happening during the looting in Salford:

[T]hey was breaking into shops and they was literally smashing things up they was just trashing it for the sake of trashing it, not for any financial gain or anything. Some financial gain but really you are not going to gain much when you are breaking into cash convertor or pound shops are you really?

In addition, it is important to remember that rioters rarely specialize in their disorderly conduct, regularly being involved in violence or threats or theft alongside more general misconduct. Although some involved in the riots were there with the sole purpose of looting goods from shops, it would be misleading to see all looting in this way. For many, there were no clear-cut distinctions between looting and other activities. What may have started out as a protest, or as an opportunity to exact some form of perceived revenge on the police, might later turn to theft and associated criminal damage as opportunity arose. The following respondent, a 56-year-old man from south London, who was involved in the rioting for a few hours on one evening, describes the sequence of activities he was involved in:

Well I threw bricks at the old bill, I threw bottles at the old bill, I threw all sorts, whatever I could get my hands on, smashed up a car, a Police motor, broke the windows... Yeah a police car, tried to turn it over (laughs)... there was a few of us, you know, turned it over, left from there and went in a couple of shops, broke in a couple of shops, took a few things and that was it.

This brings us back to Mac Ginty's argument that looting, in part, should be viewed as *political* violence. Looting is dependent, he says:

... on its political context and particularly its close relationship with periods of violent political upheaval. Although it may be difficult to infer a political meaning from a single act of looting, the political context of the breakdown of law and order, and the temporary permissibility of acts ordinarily deemed criminal, are sufficient and legitimise the categorization of looting as a political act, or at least an act enabled by a political context. (2004: 861)

Although the bulk of Mac Ginty's (2007) analysis of looting focuses on a somewhat different context than that of the August 2011 English riots, our argument is that it is important not to present looting as it were effectively apolitical. This is not to argue that every act of looting has a political motive—far from it. Rather, it is to acknowledge two things. First, that the looting took place in the context of riots, elements of which, at least, had a clearly oppositional character (*Guardian/LSE* 2011). In contrast to some analyses therefore, it is our argument that not only was there a significant *political* component to the disorder but that the looting, in part, also needs to be seen through this lens. For many rioters, the central concerns they expressed were political and related to what they perceived to be the moral double standards visible around them (their assessment that police officers, MPs and bankers, among others, were rarely if ever held to account for their misconduct), their own marginalization from the mainstream and their sense that their needs and views were ignored by the government. As Ray (2014: 118) puts it, 'to suggest that arson, looting and street battles resulting in five deaths and £200 million worth of damage signal "conformity" [to the underlying values of consumer culture] is missing the tension between cultural goals and the frustrations of visible exclusion from affluent society'.

Second, and relatedly, some of those involved in looting were also involved in other more obviously 'political' elements of the rioting, or saw their actions, including looting, in part, through a political lens. As one 27-year-old male respondent from Manchester observed, 'even the act of looting for a lot of people was to express something for them'. As another 22-year-old male respondent from Manchester pithily observed, 'you don't get that many people that angry just cos they want to go robbing'. Indeed, one 20-year-old male from London drew a direct connection between the looting and the shooting of Mark Duggan. Many commentators on the riots have been dismissive of the idea of a link between a shooting in London on 4 August 2011 and the violence that occurred in other cities many days later.⁵ However, as this respondent suggests, it is possible that some of the looting itself, not just the violence, might on occasion have potentially been part of a broader backlash:

People think it happened because like, people just wanted to take stuff because they couldn't afford it. It had nothing to do with that. It's the simple fact that somebody that wasn't armed got shot, and

⁵ One recent and interesting exception is Lisa McKenzie's insider study of St Ann's in Nottingham, an area in which brief but serious disorder occurred in August 2011, where she draws a very clear link between what occurred in Tottenham and what occurred in Nottingham some days later, saying of the growing tension in the area: 'It is interesting how the shooting and death of a young man in London had managed to become so relevant in my home' (2015: 185).

got shot and got killed, like that's, the government are just gonna get away with it again. And we thought it was time for them to pay, innit? 'Cause it's not like it was the first time, it was a sort of, revenge sort of thing. Where everyone's just had enough and it was just going over the top so we did something about it.

Even when there was no perceived connection between the shooting that occurred in the build-up to the riots and the subsequent looting, it is still possible, as this 24-year old from Birmingham argues, to understand elements of the looting as a 'political' act:

We took stuff off shelves and we took back what we think the Government owe us. That was the bottom line... it was nothing to do with what happened in London [the shooting of Mark Duggan] it wasn't to do with anything, it was just people had enough of living they way they living.... It just seemed like everyone was just having a bit of pay back to the Government.

As we have outlined, looting in the context of civil disorder involves a set of activities, and a range of emotions and motivations, that defy easy categorization. Very much in line with Mac Ginty's (2004) approach, we take the view that looting in such contexts should, at least in part, be viewed as a form of political violence. To argue this is not to suggest that everyone involved in such activities is consciously engaged in some form of *political* protest, rather it is to acknowledge both the broader context in which looting takes place and the complexity of the behaviour on view.

Conclusion

We have sought to make three arguments in this article. First, we argued that some previous analyses, in focusing predominantly on looting and consumer culture, have tended to argue or to imply that the 2011 riots represent something of a departure from riots of the past. However, any survey quickly has to acknowledge that looting is a common, almost ubiquitous feature of major contemporary urban violence. It is possible that what occurred in 2011 might have been more extensive than in most previous riots but, if so, any significant differences in 2011 are matters of degree rather than kind (Newburn 2015). What does seem possible is that the looting that did occur was more *visible*, largely as a consequence of the extraordinarily mediatized environment in which the riots took place: rolling news, the widespread availability of mobile phone photographs and video footage as well as the increasingly ubiquitous presence of CCTV (Greer and McLaughlin 2010).

Second, we argued that analyses that focused primarily on looting and consumer culture have tended to underplay those elements of the 2011 England riots that did not involve the desire to do some 'shopping for free'. Rioting, pretty much by its nature, is varied in character and generally encompasses both a wide range of activities and a similarly complex range of attitudes and motivations. The 2011 riots were no exception, with very significant levels of violence, of attacks on and destruction of property, and with motivating energy that was drawn from a whole range of grievances including, initially, the shooting of Mark Duggan, but which also encompassed a more generalized anger towards the police and anger towards and resentment of other elites viewed as engaging in morally questionable behaviour while supporting or implementing social policies responsible for growing social inequality (Lewis *et al.* 2011). In our view, therefore, these were far from being riots of 'objectless dissatisfaction'.

Third, and somewhat in parallel, we argued that analyses that focused primarily on consumer culture also tended to underplay the expressive, violent and political features of the looting itself. Citing Rock's (1981) observation that there are occasions when actions can be relatively 'innocent of profound meaning', we argued for recognition of the expressive and emotional characteristics of looting, noting its often spontaneous, opportunistic character, and highlighting the carnivalesque nature of some of what occurred. In addition, however, and building on literature from other fields, we argued that looting in the context of riots ought, at least in part, to be seen as a form of political violence. That is to say looting generally requires violent challenges to the rule of law before it can occur on a widespread scale (this is one of the features that makes such forms of appropriation *looting*), and it regularly involves or is accompanied by violence.

Motivationally, looting is more complex to characterize than accounts of riotous consumerism tend to allow. A great many involved in such activity in the 2011 riots were undoubtedly intent on participating in 'shopping for free'. However, some were simply taking advantage of the disorder to secure mundane material goods that their disadvantaged socio-economic position meant they often found difficult to afford and the riots offered them a brief opportunity to acquire. Finally, for some, their involvement was an expression, at least in part, of a generalized discontent, part of a broader 'political' protest and one means of articulating their resentment of and anger towards the powerful and wealthy. In short, it is important to recognize that 'looting' encompasses a range of activities and a spectrum of motives and meanings, and any convincing analysis and explanation must avoid reducing it to any one of its contributory elements.

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