

14. "Criminality Pure and Simple": Comparing the Response to the Student Protests and the August Riots

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Two struggles happened within the space of a year in the UK, both dominated by young people and both rejecting left parties and organisations: the student struggle which reached its height in a series of demonstrations in November and December 2010; and four days of riots in August 2011. Although the form and participants of the events overlapped, they were responded to very differently by both the state and the media. The student movement was recognised as a legitimate struggle that at times overstepped its boundaries, while the August riots were seen as nothing but a problem that needed solving. We argue that, whereas the riots on the student demonstrations could be recuperated as actions that made demands of the state - breaking the law to improve the law - the August riots broke the law to break the law, and so were harder to recuperate. As David Cameron said, they were "criminality pure and simple."

As soon as they formed a government with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats reneged upon their pre-election pledges not to raise tuition fees. In autumn 2010, a bill was drafted to triple fees to £9,000 a year, restructure higher education towards a market model and scrap the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), a £30 a week benefit for 16-18 year olds in full-time education with parents on low wages.

In early November, the National Union of Students (NUS) called a demo to ask Liberal Democrat MPs - many of whom had enjoyed considerable student support in the last election - if they would 'please' change their minds and vote against the bill. Middle class and working class university students and college students left the demonstrations to smash the Tory party headquarters at Millbank. By condemning this action as 'despicable', the NUS leadership lost any remaining support it had amongst the students. But the vacuum they left was filled by the various university occupations: they made websites, put out press releases and set up their own Twitter, Facebook and flickr accounts. Like the NUS, they directed their demands at politicians, particularly the Liberal Democrats. The choice these politicians were faced with - to support their leader and the tuition fees raise or to keep their promises to decrease tuition fees - was presented as a moral one: "Nick Clegg shame on you! Shame on you for turning blue!"

But although the university occupations and older Trotskyist student groups addressed the media and called the subsequent demos, they were not in control of the movement's nature or representation. The sight of a megaphone wielding student screaming at people that they were going in the wrong direction or hitting the wrong targets - "Stop doing that, we're not against the police, we're against the government!", "Go the other way, I'm in control!" - was not uncommon. They were not in control. The people they were trying to lead weren't listening. They were angry. And they knew that marching along pre-arranged routes to a boring rally didn't stop the war.

For two months there were weekly local demonstrations in which school students joined college and university students, walking out of lessons and rampaging through the streets. Most demonstrations ended with people being contained in one place by police until late at night. On the final national demonstration, when the vote was due to take place, police contained thousands at Parliament Square. Inside the kettle, people danced together to sound systems, smashed the windows of the Treasury, destroyed bus-stops, fought the police, and burnt park benches and school books. Some people broke away from the kettle, and, after a failed attempt to light the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree, ran down Oxford Street, smashing shops and attacking Prince Charles's cavalcade on the way.

The form of these protests in many ways anticipated the riots the following August: they refused to follow planned routes or to stay as one mass; property was destroyed; people fought off the police; and there was a feeling of criminality and of taking the streets. At moments the violence superseded demand making. But, unlike the riots, all this took

place in central London, and so the protests' targets of destruction were largely symbols of power and state authority - the Conservative party headquarters, the Treasury, the Cenotaph and Prince Charles.

Right-wing journalists recognised the students' right to protest, but argued that violence was not consistent with that right. "The irony of attacking and defacing monuments to the freedom which allowed this demonstration to take place clearly escaped the mob".¹ Students were criticised for not having a serious enough relationship to their demands, and for having little understanding of the reality of the cuts - they were either too poor or too posh: the working class students were 'thugs', 'yobs' and 'troublemakers', and the middle-class students were a privileged elite who were being subsidised for three years so that, "between agitprop they can drift into the odd sociology lecture".²

The Left took the students seriously. It was understood that the demands of the demonstration extended beyond those made explicit: commentators declared that the protest "shouldn't be understood simply in economic terms as a complaint against fees" but also as opposition to "the ideological devastation of the education system" and "the increasingly utilitarian approach to human life that sees degrees as nothing but 'investments' by individuals".³ There was a willingness on the Left to attribute even the violent actions to a shared political consciousness. It was commonly argued that, as the violence was targeted at property, it was not really violence at all, and that, if it was violence, it was nothing compared to the violence that the government was doing to the education system. One journalist said cheerfully, "Protesters have broken windows and made their way onto the roof. Twitter reports indicate that some have taken a sofa from inside Millbank and put it outside, with the quite *reasonable* argument that 'if we're going to be kettled we may as well be comfy'".⁴ Understood as a movement making self-conscious defensive and reformist demands of the state, the Left enjoyed the property destruction as the 'reasonable' effervescence of a movement which was on their side.

Shaken by these protests, the government brought the vote forward so that it coincided with the beginning of the Christmas holidays. The vote was lost and tuition fees were tripled. Despite the intensity and size of the student demonstrations, the government hadn't listened. A proposed walk-out in early 2011, on the day that EMA was due to be scrapped, was attended by less than 200 people. The initial optimism had vanished, and with harsh penalties imposed on school students who skipped school, all subsequent demos were smaller, capable of less, and eventually fizzled out completely.

An interview at the time with two gang members who went to the student demonstrations to steal wallets and mobile phones gave some idea of what was to come:

I'm not there to 'Tory scum this and that'...I'm there for a reason [to make money], just like they [the students] claim to be there for a reason, and they've got music pumping and that. I know that if I was going to somewhere to protest, and I had two, three thousand people behind me and they was all saying right we're listening to you, there wouldn't be no music, there would be nothing, it would be pure silence and you'd hear man, that's exactly what you would hear, it would be like two, three thousand titans walking down the road, that's exactly what it would be like, mate.

We do know that these Tories that are in now, obviously they seem to be messing a lot of things up, and everybody's angry, everybody seems to have come to a point where they've just had enough, and that's where it's going to spill over see, at the moment it's all up [central] London, and some sort of control, but it's going to break free from that soon, and it's going to be in your high street, in your normal high street, in your Greenwiches, your Woolwiches, those sorts of places.

When it gets to the actual streets, and it stops coming off these main tourist attraction sorts of spots and that yeah, and when it starts coming to the actual place where you live and sleep. Wow.⁵

By not meeting their demands, the government removed a rhetoric within which to frame the young people's dissent. But on the demonstration in which the vote was lost, students vowed to come back. "This is just the beginning," one blogged defiantly. Another shouted to the media, "We'll be back!". Did what was left escalate into the action that happened the following August?

The following summer, riots spread across the country. Gangs held a four day truce. Many of the same teenagers who had taken part in the student protests now took to rioting without music or slogans. The riots spread from Tottenham in North London, to South, West and East London. For three days, people in the capital looted and burnt out shops, set up burning barricades and battled with the cops. Whereas the students had been largely contained in police kettles, the police were

running far behind the riots, afraid of advancing too close, until, on the fourth day, police forces from across Britain came to London to patrol the streets in armoured cars. That night was quiet in London, but the riots had spread to other major cities - Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Nottingham... These were finished the following day, and the #riotcleanup began. Courts were in session throughout the night, and thousands of people were imprisoned for years at a time.

Unlike the student demonstrations, the riots had no media reps. Cameras were smashed, and journalists took cover on the cop side of the barricades. The media on the Left and the Right refused to see any continuity between the actions of the students and the actions of the rioters. After all, the riots couldn't be seen as legitimate, whichever way you looked at them.

The right-wing press described the rioters as feral children, running wild because they lacked fathers and family values. Although the same journalists had heavily criticised the violent actions of the students, it was only for the August rioters that they pulled out racism and eugenics. On prime time TV, a popular historian quoted a fascist speech by sixties politician Enoch Powell, and told viewers that the reason this riot included both white and black people was that "the whites have become black".⁶ In one mainstream right-wing newspaper, a picture of Hackney teenagers in masks was accompanied by the caption, "Do rioters... have lower levels of a brain chemical that helps keep behaviour under control? Scientists think so."⁷ One of their journalist wrote: "Their behaviour on the streets resembled that of the polar bear which attacked a Norwegian tourist camp last week. They were doing what came naturally and, unlike the bear, no one even shot them for it".⁸

Despite implying that they were sub-human or comparing them to wild animals, the Right still considered the rioters human enough to be held responsible for the riots. David Cameron even suggested that children (and perhaps their parents too) should be considered fully responsible for their actions. He insisted the unrest was nothing to do with the socio-economic situation, but was "criminality pure and simple and it has to be confronted and defeated... You will feel the full force of the law, and if you are old enough to commit these crimes, you are old enough to face the punishments".⁹

Most of the Left argued that responsibility lay not with the rioters, but with the rich and powerful. From the mainstream Left to Trotskyist and anarchist groups, it was commonly argued that 'we can neither condone nor condemn' the rioters. Just like we cannot condone or condemn the polar bear that attacked the Norwegian tourist camp. We can only condone or condemn responsible human beings. While content

during the student protests to argue for the reasonableness of a responsible human being stealing a sofa when they are being contained by police, the Left was uninterested in exploring the reasonableness of stealing a new pair of trainers when you might need to run from the police (or might want to sell them). And they certainly didn't consider the reasonableness of acting criminally for criminality's sake. Rather than condone or condemn the rioters, it was easier to suggest that responsibility for the riots lay elsewhere.

The Left made an effort to identify the riots' external 'causes' - the closing down of youth centres, the end of EMA, the aggression of the police, incessant advertising, and unemployment. They suggested that these causes could be ended if bankers were less greedy and politicians changed their policies. The only people who were responsible for the riots, then, were the politicians and the bankers who should put the system back in order. Not only is the Left wrong that the politicians and the bankers have the power and ability to do this, but they are wrong that the rioters have no agency or power.

Fearful of this battle without slogans, music or demands, all the Left could do was hope that the politicians would bring it back onto the terrain of policies and solutions, putting a stop to it kindly. Placing the responsibility for the rioters' actions with the politicians, the Left exaggerated how much agency the politicians have and downplayed the agency of the rioters. By doing so, they attempted to embrace the rioters again in the system that their criminality, for four days, threatened to escape.

The riots were not simply the result of the action or inaction of politicians, but were the reasonable actions of people with nothing to lose consciously refusing their situation, taking revenge on that situation. Of course the rioters didn't choose to have nothing to lose, but they did choose to respond in the way they did. The Right understood the riots better than the Left in this respect: the rioters were responsible for their own criminality. In one of the few media interviews conducted during the riots, a journalist asks a mask-wearing rioter:

If you're law-abiding and you've got no reason to fear the police, you wouldn't need to hide your identity would you?

The rioter answers:

I'm not law-abiding, mate.¹⁰

The riots were not crime as a means to a message, being violent to get heard, but were criminality for criminality's sake - criminality pure and simple. Not breaking the law to make demands of the state, but breaking the law to break the law.

Recognising the agency of the rioters does not mean we have to argue that they had hidden demands, as some on the Left did. For the word 'demand' - even when implicit or unanswerable - suggests that a third party is involved: a demand involves mediation, you have to demand something *of* someone or something. Although the loss of EMA, the aggression of the police, the closing of youth centres, were all part of the situation that contributed to people rioting, and, indeed, were cited by many rioters as reasons for rioting, this does not make the bringing back of EMA, the re-opening of youth centres, or a less aggressive police force implicit demands of the riots. You might say you wouldn't have shoplifted food if you hadn't lost your job, but that doesn't mean that by shoplifting you demand your job back, even implicitly. Neither is shoplifting a demand for food. You are not demanding food. You are taking it. When you throw something at a cop you don't demand they feel pain, you make them feel pain. You don't demand revenge, you take it. You don't demand the streets, you take them. The rioters were not demanding to be treated better, they were saying 'fuck off'. They were not demanding what we want, they were getting what we want. As people said at the time, "That's what it's all about, it's showing the police we can do what we want, and now we have".¹¹ They were the days when "we could have run of the streets".¹² The riots were about taking, not demanding. Significantly, the only slogan that survived from the student demos was answered by itself: "Whose streets? Our streets!".

And they were our streets for four days. Those days were joyous. Many of the rioters said they were the best days of their lives and, given the opportunity, they would do it again. The riots were victorious as long as they lasted. But they didn't last long. Repression against the student movement was nothing in comparison to the repression against the rioters. Whereas the government ended the student protests by not listening, there was no option of refusing to listen to the riots, for the rioters didn't want to be listened to. They were going to continue as long as they could, not as long as it seemed that they might be heard. All the state could do was frighten off or physically remove them from the streets. "You will feel the full force of the law," was the only response that could be made to a struggle that refused to recognise or address itself to politicians; that refused to be recognised or addressed.

Notes

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- 1 Paul Harris, 'Defacing the Cenotaph, urinating on Churchill... how young thugs at student protest broke every taboo', *The Daily Mail*, 10 December 2010. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1337315/TUITION-FEES-VOTE-PROTEST-Thugs-deface-Cenotaph-urinate-Churchill.html>>
 - 2 Harry Phibb, *The Mail Online*, 'Self indulgent student agitprop shows the case for tuition fees', 9 November 2011. <<http://phibbsblog.dailymail.co.uk/2011/11/self-indulgent-student-agitprop-shows-the-case-for-tuition-fees.html>>
 - 3 Nina Power, 'Student protest: We are all in this together', *The Guardian*, 10 November, 2010. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/10/student-protests-conservative-party-hq-occupation#start-of-comments>>
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 Vice Media Inc, 'Rule Britannia: Teenage Riot - Part 5', 2011. <<http://www.vice.com/rule-britannia/rule-britannia-teenage-riot-episode-5>>
 - 6 David Starkey, *Newsnight*, BBC, 12 August 2011.
 - 7 Daily Mail Reporter, 'Rioters may have 'lower levels' of a brain chemical that keeps impulsive behaviour under control', *The Daily Mail*, 9 August, 2011. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2024173/Rioters-lower-levels-brain-chemical-keeps-impulsive-behaviour-control.html>>
 - 8 Max Hastings, *Mail Online*, 'Years of liberal dogma have spawned a generation of amoral, uneducated, welfare dependent, brutalised youngsters', 12 August 2011. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2024284/UK-riots-2011-Liberal-dogma-spawned-generation-brutalised-youths.html>>
 - 9 David Cameron, Downing Street Statement on the riots in London and other cities, 9 August, 2011. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8691034/London-riots-Prime-Ministers-statement-in-full.html>>
 - 10 Sky News, 9 August, 2011.
 - 11 BBC News, 'London rioters: "Showing the rich we do what we want"', 9 August, 2011. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14458424>>
 - 12 *The Guardian*, 'Reading the Riots: Investigating England's summer of disorder'. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots>>