

## **‘Grab and Go’: Some Sociological Musings of the 2011 ‘Disturbances’**

In August 2011 I attended an academic conference in Oslo, Norway. The theme of the conference was that of power and participation in contemporary Western societies. The event by pure coincidence was staged only days after the home-grown right wing extremist who struck out at Norway’s ‘progressive’ pluralist and multi-ethnic social policies. Behring Breivik’s bombing of the offices of Norwegian Prime Minister and a number of other official buildings, alongside the massacre of nearly one-hundred young socialists at their camp meeting, amounted to his attempt, as he saw it, to save Norway from itself. The modest hotel where I stayed for the duration of the conference was less than a hundred yards where the blast occurred. I took the opportunity to visit the city’s Cathedral where thousands of flowers had been left in tribute to the dead and injured after I could only reflect on how the Norwegians, known for their peaceful way of life, public spiritedness and hospitality, had been traumatised by the unexpected outrage.

During the conference I encountered several academics discussing the ‘disturbances’ in the UK (or, more precisely, England, but interesting not Wales or Scotland).<sup>1</sup> At first it was all news to me. I switched on the television to witness that some of our cities and major towns had been subject to arson attacks, shop centres looted, and incidents of urban unrest (resulting in 5 deaths, and at least 16 civilian injuries and 186 police injuries by the end of the riots). To my bemusement I watched the images of several buildings burning in my original home town of Croydon, including a large furniture store that was once a local landmark. My personal reaction was to ask the question what have ‘they’ done to my country? I was also asked by the fellow international sociologists at the conference what I made of it all. I could only reply that it was to have been totally expected and perhaps a re-run of the urban disturbances of the 1980s when an earlier recession had hit the UK. I remember personally viewing the destruction wrought during the Brixton riots in of 1981. Thirty years later we might enquire ‘have we been here before?’ The short answer is yes and no.



Predictably much debate in the media and among political pundits has followed the riots. Also predictable has been the explanations forwarded including the general economic climate caused by the credit crunch, the subsequent result of the coalition government’s cut back of services and benefits, community breakdown, the creation of a new under-class, lack of parental control of children and teenagers that has created a young ‘feral’ generation, a

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<sup>1</sup> Why the major towns and cities of Scotland and Wales avoided the worst of the riots is a question that would be deserving of another paper in its own right.

recession created by 'greedy bankers', and a disintegrating prison system. These central issues raised do suggest that we have indeed 'been here before'.

Going by the political discourse 'our' society is under attack from 'outsiders' dedicated on 'mindless criminality' from whom we need protection. But is it possible that we need protection from ourselves?

The popular press has had a field day. Typical was the claim by Max Hastings in the *Daily Mail*:

*Rioters are victims of a perverted social ethos, which elevates personal freedom to an absolute, and denies the underclass the discipline - tough love - which alone might enable some of its members to escape.*<sup>2</sup>

Maybe Hastings is partially right with the first part of his statement. But there is more to ponder.

No doubt there will be academic articles even books forthcoming in plenty explaining the riots. Certainly, there has been some early attempt to account for what they were and even what they are not. For instance, Reicher and Scott<sup>3</sup> point out that the 'riots' cannot be understood as an explosion of 'mob irrationality'. Nor can they be adequately explained in terms of individuals predisposed towards criminality by nature of their pathological disposition. Rather, we have to consider the disturbances in terms of the psychology of the crowd. The sociologist might not find this thesis very illuminating and again at best only partially correct. But hold that word 'pathology'. We will come back to it later.

What then might sociology have to say? In recent years the discipline been much maligned. If it doesn't contribute towards the nation's economic recovery, it is not worth doing. Such a narrow and blinkered view ignores the fact that sociology can make a contribution in explaining why we have got into our mess in the first place and perhaps how we can get out of it. I am grateful here to have the opportunity to offer my own musings. But in doing so, I am acutely aware that my thoughts may not go down particularly well in some quarters.

### **Revisiting the 'Classics'**

I have noticed a tendency in recent years to return to the 'classics' of sociology, namely the work of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx. This was entirely predictable too. The postmodern turn has led to a kind of theoretical cul-de-sac for the discipline. A world of uncertainty and relativism has impacted sociology as well. It has come to lack clarity and direction. I have read a fair few articles and reviewed several other papers that are returning to these so-called 'Founding Fathers'. Some scholars have justified this enterprise either by stating that we need to revisit the 'classics' works, and to take a look at 'what they really said' and not what we have long thought they may have said regarding modernity. This I think is partly signs of the intellectual bankruptcy by a new generation of sociologists who probably never really understood Durkheim, Weber and Marx in the first place. Alternatively, there is a return to their works to see to what extent they are relevant to understanding events as they unfold in the world today.

Curiously, I have come across very few papers that have applied the work of Marx to the nature of the world economy. One is bound to ask the question: where are the Marxist theorists when you want them? Surely Marx would have had something to say about the riots. 'Blame the bankers' for the recession and everything that happens in its wake. After all,

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<sup>2</sup> Max Hastings, *Daily Mail*, August 10, 2011

<sup>3</sup> Stott, C. 'Getting into the Mindset of a mob mentality', *The Independent*, August 9, 2011. Steve Reicher and Cliff Scott's work is published as an e-book *Mad Mobs and Englishmen?*, Constable & Robinson., 2011.

we live in a world where finance capital accumulation has wrecked havoc, cutting out the troublesome effort, as Marx prophesied, of 'production'. Why produce things when you can live off of those who do (including employers) and by-pass all the hard work by speculation and usury? To be sure, the bankers and speculators are frequently blamed today for a world where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, laying a game of financial monopoly with our hard earned money. Perhaps, though, this is a symptom as well as a cause of our malaise. Similarly, it is all too easy to suggest that the riots in English cities and towns were an expression of some underdeveloped class consciousness. Certainly it is interesting that the looting of 40-inch plasma televisions was preferable to creating a social movement aimed at challenging the powers that be and demanding radical political and economic change. All perfectly true, but this is not the theoretical direction that I wish to take.

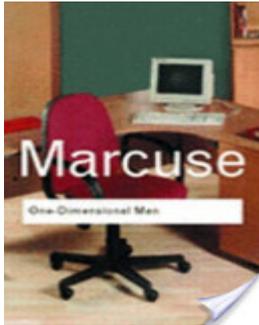
Maybe there is a sense in which we are all to blame. Perhaps we should point a finger at the 'us' rather than the 'they', the 'outsiders'. The great majority of us subscribe to the consumer culture and the unlimited expectations that this brings in its wake. The Holy Grail we search for is an increased and ever-increasing standard of living. But we do not ask *why* this is desirable as a goal. True, all able bodied individuals should be gainfully employed. Work brings social worth and structures the life experience, a means by which we might fulfil our potential. It provides a sense of purpose as well as economic reward. Yet do we need more and more material possessions, endlessly expecting more and more? There is thus the key question of whether materialism makes us happy.

Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. The fact that such a high percentage of the populations of the Western world suffer from one form of depression or another might suggest the latter. However, if we go back to explaining the mob mentality, we might go further and explore why individuals became involved and see this as a personal as well as a collective enterprise over and above theories of 'the mob'. Why not ask those involved? - understand the subjective motivation of the individual 'social actor' as we are fond of saying in sociology. I was struck by two rioters who were asked by a television interviewer 'Why did you do it?' One young looter answered that he liked to go into the West End of London suitably stylishly dressed. Apparently his designer trainers were not stylish or expensive enough to be seen out in public. Not what his mates had. He badgered his mother who could not afford to buy them for him. 'So, I took them!' When asked if he had given thought to the shopkeeper whose store had been looted he replied 'Shop keepers. They're nothing man!' Then there was the older woman who was asked the same question as to why she looted and replied 'They make millions of these (TV sets) on conveyer belts. They won't miss one.'

Now that the 'Big Society' seems to be in tatters, it would be easy to focus on the underclass - those who have missed out on the economic boom of the recent years before recession kicked in, now rendered powerless and alienated from community roots, lack of participation, lack of social inclusion, but seemingly not marginalised from the ethic of greed. But, as became clear, all sorts of people were involved, office workers, students and affluent people. What have 'we' become? The title of Marcuse well-known book with the sexist title comes to mind, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), which constituted a neo-Marxist attempt to show the dominance of the consumer society, is dated now but gives a clue: 'I am what I consume'.<sup>4</sup> No philosophy, no religion, no sense of moral or public responsibility. The masses are so duped by consumerism, claimed Marcuse, that they fail challenge those powers that be or 'think outside of the box'.

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<sup>4</sup> Marcuse, H. (1964) *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*.



'Grab and go' – is the strap-line of a well-known coffee house chain. I understand that it is fashionable to be seen there. Good for your image. 'Grab and go' has become the slogan for a generation and this is what makes the 2001 riots different from that of the 80s. It is not just a response to poverty and powerlessness. Looting is now taken to its furthest conclusion, grab and go, but don't pay. Consumerism and materialism has gathered apace. How much is my house worth? – a common theme for everyday discussion. Up until recently the chattering classes told their mates to put money in Iceland banks and make a quick return, now expected the state to bail out UK own banks. When I lecture to my undergraduate class of 150 students, I ask them to hold up their hands if they do not have a mobile phone. No one is without. Nor are rioters who are able to co-ordinate mayhem through technological communication (which apparently they can afford to buy or have appropriated by 'other means'). To an older audience, I might ask people to hold up their hands if they do not have a credit card. You might answer that credit cards are a necessity of everyday life. Besides, everyone else has one. Quite right.



### **Durkheim' Ghost**

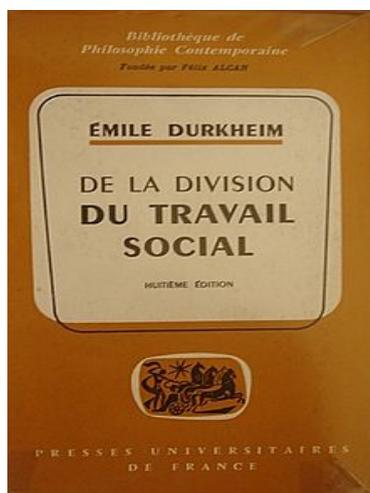
What might be the most fruitful sociological way to proceed in trying to understand the 'disturbances'? Despite the allure of re-visiting Marx and perhaps Weber, this is not the approach that I propose to take here. In contrast, I would like to examine what Emile Durkheim had to say in his writings a century ago. They are prophetic words taken up by other more recent commentators and I will come to recent writings shortly. At first glance Durkheim might seem to be a curious way forward. Durkheim is often maligned with the main critique being that his work is inherently conservative, even reactionary. But as my old professor used to say, 'every time you think that Durkheim is dead and buried, his ghost has a

habit of coming back and haunting us'. I will begin with a quote from the great man (not my professor)<sup>5</sup>:

*The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or common consciousness.*<sup>6</sup>

For Durkheim, in any society a collective conscience must function to bind its members together via norms and customs conforming that engender social awareness. These constitute a shared set of core social values that link us, the 'we', all together - a kind of social 'glue'. If this collective consciousness breaks down, anomie takes over and lawlessness results. Anomie is the deteriorating condition that results lack of binding in collective solidarity, a loss of shared norms which impose conformity. So, it might be argued that the summer rioters are not sufficiently socialised into a work ethic or a respect for democratic laws (as Hastings suggests above.)

Maybe mindless conformity should be avoided. But what if our collective beliefs and sentiments are themselves dysfunctional, even pathological? For Durkheim there was always more to the equation. He presents us with a philosophy of human nature. We can take it or leave it. For Durkheim, we are fundamentally asocial as a species. Individuals are merely a bundle of appetites and these appetites are unlimited. We are mere animals but at an advanced stage of evolution and are forced to be social only by co-operating to meet our individual needs. In turn, society is something greater than its individual parts - the 'us'. Only society can regulate our desires and the danger arises when it can't.



Curiously some of the poorest societies are the most peaceful, and contented. The problem emerges when the more we have, the more we want. It is society that sets limits and expectations. But what if those desires are limitless? Consumer society has allowed limitless materialistic desires which never bring gratification. Parallels of our present economic state are often drawn with the 1930s. But that was a depression not a recession, the Great Depression. The truth is that most people didn't have much to lose in the first place and

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<sup>5</sup> For revisiting Durkheim's work see Lemert, C. (2006), *Durkheim's Ghosts: Cultural Logics and Social Things*, London: Cambridge University Press

<sup>6</sup>Durkheim, E. (1997), *The Division of Labour in Society*, Trans. Lewis A. Coser. New York: Free Press, p.63.

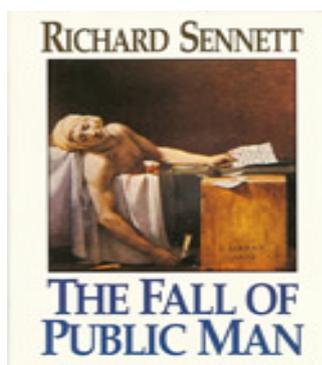
didn't expect much. Our present maladies result from the discrepancy when our material desires and expectations are not met. This was a theme later examined in the equally sexist title of T. R. Gurr's *When Men Rebel* (1970).<sup>7</sup> For Gurr, rebellion at worst, civil disturbances at best, only occur when individuals have shared grievances. Things go wrong not because of poverty per se but after a period when things get better. In the gap which results from rising expectations and the failure of those expectations to be fulfilled. The result is that frustrations overflow into violence and law breaking. Sound plausible?

### **Individualism and Civic Responsibility**

One of the other main features of the modern society for Durkheim is the importance, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. It is yet another part of the equation of understanding the current state of affairs. The individual, rather than the collective, becomes the focus of rights and responsibilities, the centre of public and private rituals holding the society together - a function once performed by religion. To stress the importance of this concept, Durkheim talked of the 'cult of the individual':

*Thus very far from there being the antagonism between the individual and society which is often claimed, moral individualism, the cult of the individual, is in fact the product of the society itself. It is the society that instituted it and made of man the god whose servant it is.*<sup>8</sup>

But there are dangers. As Durkheim noted, there are several possible pathologies (yes, that word!) that could lead to a breakdown of social integration and disintegration of the society. One is extreme individualism (and perhaps we delude ourselves that we are truly individual) that erodes community and public obligations - concern for the well-being of others. 'Others? They're nothing man.' This kind of mentality is also explored by two books that I have found personally insightful and resonate with Durkheimian thoughts - one rather dated, the other more recent. The first is the *Fall of Public Man* (more sexism!)<sup>9</sup> by Richard Sennett.



According to Sennett 'public' life once meant that essential element of one's life exterior to the circle of family and close friends. Today our lives are bereft of the joy of being with others. We have lost this lost interchange with our fellow citizens. Sennett suggests that the decline of public life results in the distortion of private as we increasingly focus on ourselves which, in turn, generates increasingly narcissistic forms of relationships and self-absorption. He concludes that our personalities cannot fully develop. Moreover, we have come to fear the

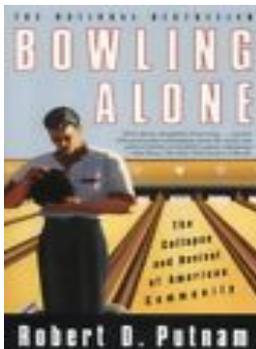
<sup>7</sup> Gurr, T. R. (1970), *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Durkheim, E. (2003), *Sociology and Philosophy*. Taylor & Francis. p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Sennett, R. (1977), *The Fall of Public Man*, New York: Knopf (Re-issued, New York: Norton, 1992).

outsider, the 'them'. We have lost the ethos of charity and co-operation - the kind of spirit that would allow us genuine and pleasing relationships with those whom we do not know intimately.

The other volume (not without its faults) is Robert Putman's much discussed *Bowling Alone* which examines the state of community relations in the USA.<sup>10</sup> Putnam warns that our stock of social capital - the very fabric of our connections with each other, has disintegrated, impoverishing our lives and communities. Few of us now belong to fewer organizations that meet for collective pursuits. We don't know our neighbours. We meet with friends less frequently. We even fail to socialise with our families. Using Putnam's analogy we're are bowling alone. But it is more than an analogy. More Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling in leagues. Putnam blames changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television and computers. To which we can add mobile phones. Some of these changes are 'structural', some technological. The underlying ethos of generating these transformations, although not exclusively so in Putnam's rather tautological argument, is the importance of the 'me'.



These books, along with Durkheim's work, encapsulate part of my thoughts about the 'disturbances' as caused by our lack of public spiritedness and duty, our desire to be concerned only with ourselves and self interest (despite the collective enterprise of gangs) which interlocks with rampant consumerism. To be sure, consumerism is an individual pursuit but we are also a social collective which subscribes to consumerism as our overarching ethic. Yes we have our anonymous 'meeting' points such as the shopping mall, but the motivation is consumerism with the individual as the site of consumption.

### Summary

Yes, sociology has something to contribute to understanding the disturbances of the summer of 2011 but as sociologists we are bound to disagree. Personally, in appreciating our lack of public spirit and collective good, I am tempted to leave the last word to Durkheim. Marx might have said that we are all duped by mass consumerism as the ultimate expression of late capitalism as some inevitable stage of history. Weber would have said that we meaningfully created the monster in the first place. Durkheim would have had his own perspective on things and may have suggested a way forward. His views on crime were a departure from conventional notions of history. He might well have challenged the explanations of the 'disturbances' that we can read today in common-sense discourses. Durkheim believed that crime is 'bound up with the fundamental conditions of all social life'. Crime is a product of social forces, the 'us'. This sort of statement gets sociology a bad name. But he had more to

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<sup>10</sup> Putman, R. (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

say. Crime also serves a social function.<sup>11</sup> He stated that crime implies 'not only that the way remains open to necessary changes but that in certain cases it directly prepares these changes'. Crime is a warning that things are going wrong and we must change things, perhaps ourselves. In our busy lives we rarely reflect on the recipe for a collective anomie. Too busy to find a point of reflection. We need a re-think. Consumers of the world united. You have nothing to lose but your mobile phones. And there I will finish my musings. Excuse me then while I grab and go.

Steve Hunt

Department of Health & Applied Social Sciences

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<sup>11</sup>Durkheim, E. (1965) 'On the Normality of Crime,' in *Theories of Society*, edited by Parsons, T., Shils, E., Naegele, D. and Pitts, J.. R. New York: Free Press. pp. 872-75.