

The English City Riots of 2011, 'Broken Britain' and the Retreat into the Present



John Flint and Ryan Powell

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Introduction

- ❑ Discourses of "Broken Britain"
- ❑ Eliasian framework
 - dominance of "involved" thinking → retreat into the present
 - ambivalence of civilizing processes
- ❑ Historical precedents of social and moral "crisis"
- ❑ 3 key arguments:
 - crises of civilisation as ubiquitous to the urban condition
 - precedents of moral panics focused on young & working class populations
 - historical continuity in techniques of governance
- ❑ Conclusions

Broken Britain?

"arising from circumstances of the most unparalleled distress...nothing but absolute want could have driven a large, and once honest and industrious body of people, into the commission of excesses so hazardous to themselves, their families, and their communities"

- Lord Byron, speech to the House of Commons, 1812

Discourses of "Broken Britain"

- New Labour and the Respect Agenda
 - 'values to support respect are becoming less widely held' (Respect Taskforce, 2006)
- persistent Conservative discourse of decivilising processes
- nostalgia in the comparison to romanticised bygone eras
 - 'disappearance of deference' compared to Victorian era citing falling church attendance and a loss of work ethic (Browne, 2008)
 - but Browne neglects historical evidence on: ambiguous attitudes to the church; alcohol/drug consumption; violence; gangs; vandalism and terrorism.
- BUT...Browne's thesis is widely shared by the British public
 - perception of decline in morals, respect and an increase in ASB

The retreat into the present

- remarkable commonality in responses to the 2011 riots
 - moral decline; loss of self-restraint; a unique contemporary crisis; youth and working-class BUT....ahistorical
- need for a long-term, detached and process-oriented approach
- theoretical tools: involvement and detachment
- *'Only small babies, and among adults perhaps only insane people, become involved in whatever they experience with complete abandon to their feelings here and now; and again only the insane can remain totally unmoved by what goes on around them. Normally adult behaviour lies on a scale somewhere between these two poles'* (Elias, 1987a, p.3).

The retreat into the present

- grasp of the relationship between knowledge and emotions is crucial
- 'double-bind' process: higher danger → higher affect in emotional response
 - perception of urban disorder and moral crisis → fear
- double-bind process as an inherent characteristic of the human condition:
 - *'While in people's relations with non-human forces the standard of both the control of self and that of external events is relatively high, in relations of people with people the socially required and socially bred standard of both is considerably lower'* (Elias, 1987a, p.11).

Involvement has the upper hand

- ❑ previously lack of emotional control in dealing with natural forces > fear & insecurity
- ❑ mastery over nature brought control over emotions and ↑ reality-congruent knowledge - experiences of social/human phenomena lag far behind
- ❑ *'The preoccupation of the sociologists with the social problems and conflicts of the present represents a dominance of involved thinking - they are highly emotionally absorbed in those problems and issues. Their very involvement indeed galvanizes them in the pursuit of short-term, empirical knowledge in order to illuminate the problems about which they feel so strongly'* (Kilminster, 1987, p.216).
 - manifested in a social fear of certain populations and urban spaces

Long-term perspective

- ❑ fluctuations in the ongoing civilizing *process*
- ❑ further developed in Wouters' informalization
- ❑ short-term perspective obscures trends
- ❑ dangerous outcomes:
 - social misdiagnoses (Kilminster, 2008)
 - legitimization of civilising offensives (Powell and Flint, 2009)
 - targeting and vilification of stigmatised (outsider) groups

An age of fear...

- *“We have entered an age of fear...Insecurity born of terrorism, of course; but also; and more insidiously, fear of the uncontrollable speed of change, fear of the loss of employment, fear of losing ground to others in an increasingly unequal distribution of resources, fear of losing control of the circumstances and routines of our daily life. And perhaps, above all, fear that it is not just we who can no longer shape our lives but that those in authority have also lost control, to forces beyond their reach.”*

(Judt, 2010, p. 234)

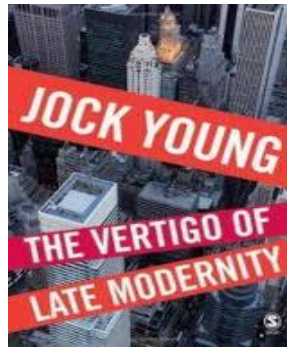
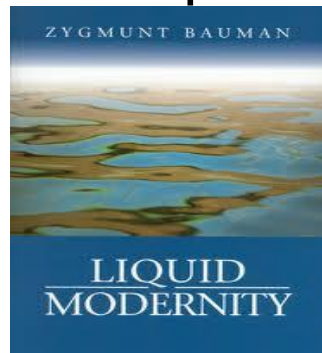


A perpetual crisis of the present

- ❑ *“We have entered an age of insecurity - economic insecurity, physical insecurity, political insecurity”*(Judt, 2010, p.8)
- ❑ Deep seated anxieties about change and narratives of uncertainty and decline and a loss of ontological security as the constancy of social and material environments is perpetually undermined (Giddens, 1990).
- ❑ An age of anxiety (Mackay, 1993) or ‘angst society’ (Scott, 2000)
- ❑ Malaise from the 1970s onwards (Overy, 2010)

3 features of the crisis paradigm

- ❑ Social solidarities have declined and self-restraint has unravelled (Pratt, 2005) as materialism and selfishness dominate contemporary life and the social stigmatisation of lower social groups intensifies.
- ❑ In age of 'liquid life' (Bauman, 2005) the fragility of routines and habits creates a 'vertigo' of late modernity' (Young, 2007).
- ❑ We become ever more aware of risks (Beck, 1992) insecurities and precariousness



Our position:

- ❑ Beyond a simple argument that the "good old days" never existed or that we have been here before
- ❑ Western cities are *less* violent, *less* dangerous and self-restraint continues to increase (Elias, 2000; Pinker, 2011)
- ❑ 'Ceaseless narratives of decline' (Pearson, 2009)
- ❑ Specific concerns about urban disorder and young people have previous parallels and precedents
- ❑ There is considerable continuity in practices of governance in the fields of anti-social behaviour, and how these are responded to by the subjects of these practices

Ubiquitous crises of civilisation

- ❑ 1871 to 1917: age of decadence and degeneration and a moment of crisis in western cities (Butterworth, 2010)
- ❑ 1920s & 1930s: morbid age and 'crisis of civilisation' within *'the glittering promise of mass consumption and a narcotic hedonism.'* (Overy, 2010)
- ❑ Beatrice Webb: 1920s 'moral miasma' in *'an atmosphere of morbid alcoholism and sexuality, furtive larceny and unashamed mendacity.'*
- ❑ 'Roaring Twenties' and the wave of informalization (Wouters, 2007)
- ❑ Precedents of anxiety and insecurity - *'everything is loose and free, but everything is problematic'* (Robert Park in foreword to Zorbaugh, 1929)

“Reclaiming delinquents for the nation”

- In 1955 a prominent report entitled *Citizens of Tomorrow* claimed that recruits to the armed forces:

“Had a poor physique, poor education and lacked religious knowledge, self-confidence, initiative and a sense of responsibility.”

(Kynaston, 2010, p.548)

Teenage



“Scuttling gangs” in Manchester, “terrorising neighbourhoods”, including a battle involving 500 participants in 1890 (Savage)



‘Apaches’ of Paris and later in Sheffield in the 1920s

A ‘new class’ of ‘city boy’ or ‘slum denizen’

The hooligan as ‘the herald of a dark hour in the nation’s affairs’ (Pearson, 2009)

Urban disorder, gangs and young people

- Long-term view reveals innumerable precedents to 2011:
 - 1898: drunkenness, fighting & robberies on August bank holidays (Savage, 2007) and abandonment of restraint and sexual conduct (Booth, 1967)
 - 1920s: sexual promiscuity: Brighton and the "dirty weekend" (Shields, 1990)
 - 1880s and 1920s & 1930s: Football violence in Sheffield/ Glasgow gangs and the Old Firm/football (Curry 2007; Davies, 2006)
 - Links with dress and delinquency (continued through mods to football casuals to hoodies);
 - 'Unfulfilled desires for consumption' epitomised youth delinquency in first half of 20th Century
 - Rejection of salaried work and family breakdown(Savage, 2007)
 - Lack of presence of fathers or male authority figures

Techniques of governance

- Need to understand similarities before identifying "new" methods of regulation and responses
 - 1880-1930: challenging authority - ignorance, ridicule and assault towards police officers and urban park attendants (Bean, 1981; Croll, 1999)
 - 1925 racecourse disorder: Act to prosecute gang hooligans based solely on police evidence (Bean, 1981)
 - Victorian era: new forms of policing at football (Curry, 2007; Davies, 2006)
 - Victorian Merthyr Tydfil: black list of "drunkards" circulated to all publicans (Croll, 1999) - naming and shaming (train "fare dodgers" today)
 - BUT limits...blacklistees revelled in their notoriety - 'immune to the civilising public gaze' (Croll, 1999) - ASBOs as a 'badge of honour'

Conclusions

- ❑ lack of acknowledgement of historical precedents in terms of "crises of civilisation" - predominance of "involved" thinking has precipitated a 'retreat into the present'
- ❑ need for a more *precise* identification of the sociological impacts of contemporary change and the *specific novel* elements of governance which are more informed by historical knowledge
- ❑ long-term perspective reveals:
 - crises of civilisation as ubiquitous to the human and urban condition
 - persistent focus on young people and working class populations within historical moral panics
 - similarity in the techniques of governance in response to these populations
- ❑ need for detachment in a detailed contrasting of social relations to reveal what is unique about today's concerns (e.g. the distance between childhood and adulthood; transitions to work)