

The geography of poverty

Feature by Carl Lee and Danny Dorling, October 2011

The recent riots and looting have provoked a fresh wave of demonisation of so-called "feral" young people in Britain's cities. Carl Lee and Danny Dorling examine the reality of life in a society which surrounds those in poverty with commodities they can never afford to own

On 4 March 1941 the London Times reported on an "epidemic" of looting in the aftermath of bombing raids over the city of Sheffield. In that same year 4,584 looting cases were processed by London courts alone.

Seventy years later, following the riots in England this August, the calls to mend what David Cameron has termed our "broken society" - usually couched in terms of better parenting and more discipline in schools - have a hollow ring when held up against the historical record.

Why not Sheffield?

Why, for example, were places like Sheffield not hit by riots this time round? Were youngsters there not "feral" enough (as the justice secretary, Ken Clarke, has chosen to describe those who rioted)?

There was not as much as a sniff of civil disorder in Sheffield this August. This was also true in the 1980s. Even in 1981, apart from a 500-strong crowd that was dispersed before they could turn their attention to some street anarchy, Sheffield was quiet while other major cities burned.

Sheffield also has one of the lowest crime rates in Western Europe for a city of its size. Is there is a place-specific ingredient that could help explain why citizens of Sheffield seem less inclined towards civil disobedience?

That great inequality exists in Sheffield is not in dispute, but the way it is manifested on the ground is different from London and many other cities in Britain. Residential segregation is more marked in Sheffield, with large outlying social housing estates being the areas of greatest deprivation in the city.

Poorer Sheffield estates can be relatively self-contained, with low levels of residential churn. They are notably far away from the wealthier areas and usually disconnected from the city centre. Travelling to wealthier areas for richer pickings is fraught with danger. If you go looting you need an escape route to get your booty home. Opportunity is everything, as that spate of looting in 1941 showed.

Alex Singleton of Liverpool University has mapped the Manchester riots according to the given address of arrested rioters. His work demonstrates a clear link between areas of deprivation and propensity to riot - 41 percent of suspects lived in the highest decile of deprivation. It also showed a clear inclination for rioters to commute. Using the same mapped data it can be demonstrated that the distance between where rioters lived and their acts of rioting was on average between 2 and 3 kilometres. Why then did disaffected youth in Sheffield show less inclination to commute to riot?

Firstly Sheffield city centre isn't Manchester city centre. There are far fewer shops and few selling big-ticket items. According to research from Callcredit Marketing Solutions, in 2010 Manchester city centre was the second largest retail concentration in the country with an annual turnover of £921 million. By comparison Sheffield, with a turnover of £420 million, ranks a mere 22nd nationally. As for what is known as "premium retailers" Manchester is nationally top, beating even Oxford Street in London. Sheffield barely makes the top 30 - with Meadowhall Regional Shopping Centre at number 29.

Meadowhall is way out of town and designed like a retail fortress. It is a privately controlled space set among the "prairie-lands" of car parks and bordered by the M1 and industry. From a retailer's perspective it is a highly defensible space. Press one button and the modern equivalents of portcullises descend.

This last observation may be pertinent for the future of our retail environments. As class divisions become entrenched through growing inequality, and as consumption patterns become increasingly differentiated, "premium retailers" may increasingly choose to "ghettoise" themselves in tightly controlled, closely watched-over and privately policed retail environments.

Geography matters when analysing riots. However, if you are a cabinet minister planning our apartheid future, it is best not to be too bullish about Sheffield. It is a city that is not a stranger to public disorder, particularly disorder driven by a political agenda. One of Margaret Thatcher's longest-held memories may well have been her only prime ministerial visit to the city, on 28 April 1983, when a thousand police battled thousands of protesters outside Sheffield Cathedral.

Battle of Orgreave

No shops were looted but significant violence was unleashed on those defending Thatcher. Fourteen months later the "Battle of Orgreave" (held on the city's boundaries) saw Thatcher's troops exact significant revenge and retribution, with 95 people being charged with riot-related offences.

Such behaviour was a fairly recent phenomenon in the city. A bit of industrial push and shove in some earlier steel strikes notwithstanding, Sheffield, led by a leftist local government, was largely at one with its working class population.

From the first Labour council of the 1920s right through to the late 1970s, inequality in the city had been progressively reduced. Citizens had an active stake in their city and the city council through housing, transport, education and leisure facilities which were at the heart of the city's self-image. Thatcherism changed all that.

The language of outrage and demonisation is not new nor is the focus on a supposedly "new" and dangerous underclass. The quote "The present troubled state of our social life [rests] with the 30 years' blind worship of their nostrums by...our Liberal friends" could quite easily have come from the pen of Melanie Phillips in the Daily Mail this year. Instead "mendacious" Mel's response to the riots was entitled "How the liberals ruined Britain".

The first quote above is actually attributed to Matthew Arnold writing in 1869. For those wishing to immerse themselves in this historical continuum of outrage and fear by the wealthy about the poor, Geoffrey Pearson's classic work *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears*, published just after the 1982 riots, is an invaluable source.

Wherever you look across a world in tumult, whether it is Egypt, Syria, Spain, India, London or even Manchester, common themes emerge. Above all else, within these countries and cities there is growing inequality and an increasing exhortation towards consumption. Power is becoming more concentrated in a confidently assertive class of the global super-rich who are increasingly detached from the everyday lives of most people.

In India uneven GDP growth at nearly 10 percent year on year has led to a staggering growth of shopping malls. In the city of Bengaluru (Bangalore) there were 16 major malls at the last count. All are privately policed and keen on enforcing clear socio-economic segregation. These are spaces for the urban elite, but they are looked upon with covetous eyes by the majority of Indians who are excluded from the global brands that proliferate on the marble shop floors.

Is India that different from Britain? India is far from immune from civil disorder and rioting and enclave living is increasingly the norm for the wealthy elites and even those a few clicks down the social scale.

That there should have been riots in Britain this August is not surprising. In fact economists have recently modelled the increased probability of riots following

spending cuts and the consequent loss of hope. Jacopo Ponticelli and Hans-Joachim Voth in a Centre for Economic Policy Research Paper (no. 8513) have found statistically significant evidence that, from at least the early 1930s in Germany through to Greece in 2010, government austerity tends to be quickly followed by "violence and social instability".

Cuts and riots

Ponticelli and Voth find that the nature of the austerity is key: "Expenditure cuts wreak havoc, tax increases do so only to a small extent and insignificantly. Overall, the budget balance matters for predicting unrest." "Contrary to what might be expected, we also find no evidence that the spread of mass media facilitates the rise of mass protests." So when services are cut (rather than taxes being raised) rioting is much more likely.

Predicting riots, like predicting earthquakes, is a fool's game. Knowing the kinds of environments, times and places in which riots and looting are likely to kick off is easier. Realisation is growing of the long-term implications of taunting the many with possessions and a lifestyle they can never attain. The richest people on earth value their privacy, but it is hard to hide mega-yachts and mansions, and hard to learn to resist walking up red carpets and talking on TV.

As the super-rich enter a new stratosphere of wealth it will become increasingly difficult to convince millions of poor Britons, tens of millions of others around the world, hundreds of millions of people in China living just over the breadline, and 700 million very poor Indians to accept their lot. It is this new world economy that has become more feral, more dog-eat-dog, more untamed, more uncultivated. Not our children.

Carl and Danny both live and teach in Sheffield

List of sources

J Ponticelli and H-J Voth (2011), 'Austerity and Anarchy: Budget Cuts and Social Unrest in Europe, 1919-2009', Centre for Economic Policy Research, <http://goo.gl/6Cf8D>

D Price (2008), Sheffield Troublemakers: Rebels and Radicals in Sheffield History, Chichester: Phillimore

I Taylor, K Evans and P Fraser (1996), A Tale of Two Cities: Global Change, Local Feeling and Everyday Life in the North of England, London: Routledge

For information about mapping the riots in Manchester go to www.alex-singleton.com/

And on shopping: IMRG, 'Manchester passes Glasgow to become largest retail centre outside London', <http://goo.gl/p9hvQ>