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On Exclusion, Manipulation, and Repression: The 2011 English Riots

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is to argue that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in power when the 2011 English riots flared up may have manipulated British citizens, with the help of the (right-wing) mass media, into accepting that 'gangs' were at the root of their problems. By all appearances, the government instrumentalized these violence collectives, and beyond them the Black community and the poor, so as to cause terrorized citizens to disregard neoliberal capitalism-generated problems, deep-seated structural problems as it were, at a time when political scandals and the anti-austerity movement were prominently featured in the news. Substantially, I contend that Prime Minister Cameron implemented his Big Society ideology, thereby punishing a section of the community and endangering democracy, seemingly under the pretence of eradicating 'gangs' and 'gang' culture, when he apparently had no interest whatsoever in destroying what can be simultaneously considered his alibi and fuel for neoliberal politics.

Keywords: *Exclusion, gangs, instrumentalization, neoliberalism, riots*

Introduction

British citizens were familiar with 'gangs' when the August 2011 English riots broke out. In Britain, the term 'gang' conjures up a racially and socially negatively connoted American construct, when an official definition was introduced in 2009 (Policing and Crime Act: section 34)[2]. Thus, British 'gangs' had been essentially portrayed by the (right-wing) mass media and politicians from across the political spectrum alike as dangerous black entities inhabiting impoverished urban settings (Mail Online, 2006 & 2007).

In the aftermath of 6 days of rioting, burning, looting, and violence against the person throughout England in August 2011 (DCLG, 2013: 5), Prime Minister David Cameron (2011) declared "an all-out war on gangs and their culture". The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in fact considered that 'gangs' encapsulated the moral, social, and populist crises linked with immigration, terrorism, and drugs (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 16), therefore that they epitomized what they believed ruined British society. They unequivocally construed the disturbances as mindless delinquency rather than as a protest

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[2] The definition was revised by the Serious Crime Act 2015 (section 51). A gang is defined as "a group that consists of at least three people, and has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group", and engages in violence or drug-dealing activity. I shall use quotation marks to remind the reader that the term, when used by the mass media, politicians or the public, does not necessarily refer to bona fide gangs.

movement from below against some sort of "capitalist revolution from above" (Wacquant, 2009a: 127). Yet, was the government genuinely set to try and annihilate 'gangs'?

The thrust of the argument developed in this article is to demonstrate that 'gangs' came as a boon to a coalition which were in the grip of political scandals and protests against austerity measures (BBC News, 2011). 'Gangs' appeared to be an invaluable and indispensable distraction, folk devils that citizens would turn their attention to, away from neoliberal capitalism-generated issues, namely deep-seated structural problems.

The government exploited the 'gang' phenomenon and manufactured a moral panic with the help of the mass media, manipulating the population one may argue, in order to justify a harsh crackdown on violence, as well as the implementation of their Big Society project, to the greatest possible extent. This political ideology implied devolving political power and social responsibility to local communities and combined free-market economics and a paternalistic understanding of governance (Crines & Halsall, 2012). However, substantially, the effectual eradication of 'gangs' was presumably not on the coalition's agenda.

Drawing on the theses developed by Hallsworth and Brotherton (2011), Wacquant (2008, 2009a-b), and Richards and Avery (2000) mainly, as well as on a thorough review of scholarly publications, official reports, press articles, grey literature, and on two field studies[3], firstly, I shall contend that the government apparently benefited from popular sophisms which are entrenched in British society with a view to instrumentalizing 'gangs' and, beyond them, an entire social class. The aim was to convince the nation that these groups were "domestic terrorists" (McCarthy, 2004), Britain's most serious problem.

Secondly, I shall argue that ultimately, the nation's real enemy may have turned out to be the government, as, in accordance with a criminal interpretation of both the August events and 'gangs', they ended up repressing a section of the community rather than tackling the cause of their shortcomings. Officially, the strategy was motivated by security reasons, yet unofficially, the reasons may have been purely ideological. In point of fact, evidence would suggest that the government depended on the survival of 'gangs'.

Manipulation Based on Un-Debunked Myths

After a young black man who had been under surveillance within the framework of the fight against gun violence in London was killed by the police on August 4, 2011, in North London (Cutler, 2014), 66 English local authorities, mostly the poorest and most crime-ridden in the country, successively experienced riots (Home Office, 2011: 3). Following this unprecedented wave of violence, the government patently seized the opportunity to make the most of their criminals of choice – 'gangs'. Actually, a series of myths provided the coalition with the basis for justifications apparently fitting their stance.

First, to Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004: 115), "the central myth is that the gang exists". 'Gangs', they allege, are merely the product of the gang industry[4], and of the 'gangs' themselves as they strive to build their own legend. In 2012, there were an estimated 250 gangs (some 5,000 members) in London. They were blamed for 22% of serious violence, 17%

[3] The study, which was carried out in the summers of 2012 and 2013 in Tottenham, Hackney, Peckham, and Brixton as part of a research project devoted to contemporary British 'gangs', enabled the author to conduct about fifty interviews with inhabitants, former and current gang members, and social and community workers.

[4] That is liberal commentators, politicians or academics who deal with the 'gang' issue and who, sometimes involuntarily, give the impression that the nation is under the influence of US-style gangs (Hallsworth, 2014: 38).

of robberies, 50% of shootings, and 14% of rapes in the capital (London Councils, 2012: 1). Still, the government posited that 'gangs' had orchestrated the riots, hence that they were cabals (Cohen, 1969: 63), when one of the misrepresentations about 'gangs' is that they are organized (Howell, 2007: 40).

It emerged the police released misleading figures – 28% of the people arrested were initially announced to be 'gang' members, then the rate was revised downwards to 19%, then to 13%, this time for the whole country. This logically forced Cameron to downplay the role of 'gangs' in the unrest, all the more so as, on the one hand, the figures corresponded to individuals who had been caught red-handed, as they were known to the police (as 'gang' members), and not to all participants (The Guardian-LSE, 2011: 21). Out of the 13,000-15,000 individuals who were involved in the disturbances, 4,000 were arrested, 90% of whom were acquainted with the police (RCVP, 2012: 16-17). On the other hand, regional police services relied on different definitions of 'gang' (Home Office, 2011: 34). Nevertheless, the 'gang' imagery, which was integrally transposed from the United States into Britain together with its stigmatizing racial and social connotations, remained powerful and was bound to catch the public's attention (Alexander, 2011: 11).

Second on the list of myths, the characteristics associated with black families (from deprived backgrounds), whose culture is supposedly defective, un-British, and even criminogenic (Gilroy, 2002: 87). Amongst them, father hunger (Home Affairs Committee, 2007: 87), dysfunctional family structure, violence, nihilism (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 4,8), materialism, indiscipline, lack of respect, immorality (Cooper, 2012: 7), hedonism, hostility to authority (Modood et al., 1997: 347), and gangsta culture[5] (Sveinsson, 2008: 24). The British black community has been stigmatized, pathologized, essentialized, and criminalized on cultural and moral grounds for decades. From the black mugger in the 1970s (Hall et al., 1978: 26) to the black rioter in the 1980s (Van Dijk: 246), and the black 'gang' member at the turn of the 21st century, the black Other has been successfully ideologically scapegoated (Hall et al., 1978: viii, 222), thus turned into the perennial folk devil (Cushion et al., 2011: 12). The coalition, thanks to such prejudices as well as yet another misconception about 'gangs' – that their members are ethnic minority young men – (Howell, 2007: 40) put the blame on a cultural problem.

Among politicians, 'culture' had become a euphemism for 'race', and more specifically for Blacks, that was as crystal clear to the public as the term 'gang', or even 'rioter' (Sveinsson, 2008: 10). In the aforementioned speech, Cameron (2011) stated "these riots were not about race", yet his references to "street culture" and "gang culture" seem to belie that claim. The official statistics contradicted the idea that criminals are overwhelmingly black, since the rioters arrested were mainly men (89%), aged 10-24 (72%), but 40% were White, 39% Black, 11% mixed, 8% Asian, and 2% belonged to other ethnic categories (Home Office, 2011: 28-29). Black rioters did not outnumber white ones outright, and the figures mirrored the ecology of the disadvantaged neighbourhoods where the riots had exploded, and where 'gangs' were to be found (Joseph & Gunter, 2011: 4). Now, one has to point out that in reality, the adjective 'black' refers to a wider group than the black community. Historian and broadcaster David

[5] Gangsta culture is an urban subculture often associated with African-American culture, which glorifies violence, misogyny, drugs, money, and rebellion against social norms, as well as reflects an experience of marginalization (Hagedorn, 2008: xxviii).

Starkey articulated this view, controversially, asserting that black culture contaminated young working-class Whites, *Chavs*, who therefore "have become black" (Starkey, 2011).

Povertyism – the popular, political, and media hostility towards people who experience poverty, is deeply embedded in the wider society with Victorian views about the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' categories (Taylor & Campbell, 2024). This is reflected in British legislation on poverty, as it generally presupposes that there is a nexus between rights and responsibilities – assistance may be available providing that more or less objective conditions are met (Griggs & Bennett, 2009: 1). The refusal of the UK to assimilate the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights into national law (House of Lords, 2004: 3) has exacerbated ordinary social attitudes that denigrate the disordered marginal populations and erode support for anti-poverty policies amongst the public. In short, poverty is understood as a choice and associated with failed morals – it therefore requires unwarranted sanctions (Amnesty International, 2024).

The sophism prevails that the worst-off are different, vicious, of lesser value, and the better-off sometimes even criticize the fact that many poor people share tastes similar to their own. For instance, the looters who won fame during the 2011 riots were unanimously condemned because they too were attracted to high-tech goods and designer clothes (Neate et al, 2011), as if they were not so culturally different after all. The irony is that culturally speaking, the rioters incarnated the neoliberal ideology since one may posit that they both were produced by it and appropriated it. Still, on the one hand, 18% of the looted businesses were supermarkets and restaurants, against 10% of clothing stores and 12% of electronic stores (Home Office, 2011: 14). On the other hand, some looters came from white middle and upper class backgrounds (Mail Online, 2011). Britain's imperialist and evolutionist heritage enabled the coalition to demonize the members of the presumed dangerous class further, that is 21% of the population at the time (Aldridge et al., 2011), irrespective of their race (Mac Donald, 1997: 9). Mainstream society was therefore well acquainted with such "suitable enemies" (Christie, 1986), and ready to take to the government's narrative.

Third fiction on the list, the simplistic claim according to which 'gang' activity and rioting are criminal activities. The position of the coalition as to why the riots had erupted was limpid from the beginning; consequently, they commissioned no public inquiry on the Scarman model. A mere panel was formed, which published a report riddled with Victorian-like, Thatcherite references to deserving and undeserving poor (RCVP, 2012: 16). Many a researcher and community worker, Stuart Hall (2013: 393) for instance, instead interprets violence as a way for powerless citizens to empower themselves, as unwonted democratic processes arising from the hardest needs, that is the litany of deprivation, racism, alienation, unequal opportunities, police harassment, discrimination, and hopelessness. In other words, systemic injustices are commonly read into these phenomena. 59% of the young rioters brought to justice in 2011 came from the bottom 20% of most deprived areas (The Guardian-LSE, 2011: 5).

'Gangs', who are generated by the redistribution of a progressively privatized space which excludes them from resources (Hagedorn, 2005: 161), thus have a social function. For instance, they transition members into adulthood, help them to overcome structural powerlessness (Merton, 1938: 677), and provide them with some refuge founded on territorial attachment within their disorganized communities (Kintrea et al., 2008: 4-5). They also help them to regain a self-esteem that has been undermined by the way non-discredited citizens

perceive them (Dmitrieva et al., 2014: 232) or by academic failure (Pitts, 2007a: chap. 9), especially since many carry the legacy of colonialism within them (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 20), and solve the male identity crisis attributable to a matriarchal family model (Burke, 2005: 105).

'Gangs' are not sustained political organizations since they do not put forward articulated demands (Drury et al., 2012: 15). However, they manage to make the issues of people cast away to the very margins of society visible (6). Many a study has, likewise, laid stress on the socio-economic impulse behind riots (Morell et al., 2011), and the fact that rioters, whether 'gang' members or not, may be said to speak on behalf of their community. The message the August rioters conveyed in a community spirit was ultimately political (Drury et al., 2019: 11), even though they were not necessarily fully aware it was and did present it as such (Akram, 2014: 15).

In fact, rioting relates back to a political vacuum (Avenel, 2004: 86-87), to a "zero-degree protest, a violent action demanding nothing". In essence, some citizens, because they are outside the organized social space, can only manifest their discontent through irrational and cathartic outbursts of destructive violence. The riot is clearly a subjective statement about objective conditions (Zizek, 2011). What second-class citizens are aware of is that they are constantly denied self-determination, the opportunity to interact on the political level, and ultimately, the status of active citizens (Giroux, 2010: xiv). These people are certainly endowed with a political conscience (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 20) but they lack organization and union (Home Office, 2011: 4; Moxton, 2011). As a consequence, having recourse to unorthodox methods to express political views might be regarded as inseparable from the pursuit of social change. One should add that there is no doubt that some 'gang' members and rioters were hardened criminals. Nevertheless, one may aver that the coalition purposely refused to acknowledge the riots and 'gang' activity as democratic forms of participation in society, overlooking the social dimension, and offering a neo-security analysis (Cameron, 2011).

The then Prime Minister was deeply influenced by American gang buster William Bratton, his advisor, who claimed that gangs are "domestic terrorists" that should be brutally suppressed as they are no victims of exclusion (McCarthy, 2004). In fact, commentators on all sides of the political spectrum agreed that the 1980s riots may have originated in deprivation, racism, and inequalities after all, but that this time the situation was different (Khan, 2012). However, at least two arguments may disprove the interpretation that holds that "the bad", "the mad" and "the bad leading the mad" were to be blamed for the violence (Drury et al., 2019: 16).

On the one hand, 'gangs' agreed on a truce and stopped their postcode war for four days so as to unite against their oppressors (The Guardian-LSE, 2011: 22), namely the police, and by extension the government, thereby interestingly rejecting two components of neoliberalism – individualism and competition. On the other hand, one may argue that riots were, as always (O'Brien Castro, 2015), triggered by what may be regarded as an attack from the state against a member of a marginalized community. But in an era when security has taken precedence over employment security (Pitts, 2007b: 274) and electors' fears define government policy (Beck, 1992: 49), the British were ready to believe the authorities as to what and whom they should fear.

Thus, the coalition apparently exploited a series of myths so as to be in a position to instrumentalize a long-scapegoated group of individuals, the underclass, through 'gangs', on cultural and moral grounds. Evidence would suggest that the actual threat and criminal that people should beware of may have been in fact incarnated by the government.

Ideological Criminality?

On August 15th, David Cameron (2011) announced his intention to come to grips with "a major criminal disease that has infected streets and estates across our country", namely 'gangs' and 'gang' culture. The Prime Minister's official objective was to protect British citizens who seemed to be suddenly oblivious of budget restrictions, scandals, structural problems, and mesmerized by violence collectives. That was, one may argue, a questionable claim.

As a matter of fact, the government needed to protect themselves. The criminal interpretation of the wave of riots logically called for neo-security solutions which were to target 'gangs', and beyond them, the poorest. Criminalization enabled the coalition to both keep control, and distance themselves from a social or political interpretation of events, that is to say to invalidate the link between deprivation and dissent (Gaffney, 1985: 90). The government were well aware that numerous studies and reports emphasized the association between anti-social behaviour and exclusion, but one may hypothesize that they were determined to challenge experts, thereby purposely identifying the wrong causes, sheer delinquency, albeit unofficially.

Acknowledging the aforementioned nexus would have proved fatal to them. 'Gangs', their alibi, and the threat they represented, should thrive, thus poverty should thrive as well for such groups to proliferate, and for harsh neoliberalism to work smoothly. The coalition were then able to impose and justify its ideological programme, attacking the victims of the "disease", exclusion, rather than the "disease" itself, as initially announced. Poverty is a political choice, as the available funds are used to reduce the taxes of the wealthy for instance (Alston, 2018: 21-22). The various types of policies implemented logically aimed to turn 'gangs' and the poor into an inexhaustible resource as a scapegoat, in other words, it seems that those policies had to prove inefficient, contrary to appearances.

Cameron's myth-driven policy agenda was clearly modelled on the gang suppression programme carried out in the United States – a programme which, in spite of the substantial funds dedicated to it, had proved unsuccessful, because the focus had not been on the eradication of poverty (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 14). The fact that the British government overlooked successful initiatives launched in some cities may raise suspicions. They could have introduced schemes such as the acclaimed Kennedy method, otherwise known as *Operation Ceasefire*, at a national level. The latter, a collaboration between researchers and actors on the spot, entailed that 'gang' members should be accompanied into an alternative path, namely employment or training, and punished in case of refusal. The experience was launched in Manchester in 2002 (Pitts, 2016: 77). Another example of success which could have drawn the coalition's interest for the whole country is Slutkin's public health approach to 'gangs', referred to as *Cure Violence*, applied by Strathclyde Police since 2005 (together with the Kennedy method in fact), which implied that 'gangs' should be tackled as an epidemic because they do not constitute a simple law-and-order issue (SVRU, 2025).

Harsh punishment and deterrence characterized the action taken in the aftermath of the wave of violence of August 2011. The coalition immediately cracked down on rioters. Their post-

riot zero-tolerance stance combined overzealous penal sanctions and welfare benefit restrictions. 945 of the 1,483 people found guilty during the English riots were jailed without delay for an average of 14.2 months (RCVP, 2012: 17). Among infamous cases, one may cite that of a student unknown to the police who was sent to prison for 6 months because he had stolen a £3.50 case of bottled water from a Lidl (Lamble, 2013: 579); and that of a Battersea social sector tenant, a single mother, who was evicted because her son had been charged, but not convicted, for his involvement in the riots. There is a strong likelihood that this type of collective punishment, since it affects both the offender and their family, is contrary to social welfare law and the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits retroactive punishment for offences (Gilson, 2011). Considerable resources invested in multiple raids, the viewing of thousands of hours of footage, and calls for witnesses led to the recovery of stolen goods, often of low value and in council estates (Lamble, 2013: 579), and arrests long after the events (Gilson, 2011). One has to point out that because the police had been criticized for their inefficiency in dealing with the riots, the coalition made decisions in place of the chief of the Metropolitan police, notably imposing zero tolerance and reinstating the use of water cannons and rubber bullets from August 10 (Greer & Mclaughlin: chap. 7).

The coalition strengthened the legislative framework governing 'gangs' in January 2012, reinforcing injunctions against 'gang' members under 18 and introducing an aggravated offence for knife possession with a prison sentence. Adults convicted of a second violent or sexual offence could get life[6]. What's more, a month later, the Metropolitan Police Service set up a new *Trident (Gangs Crime Command)* to prevent, identify, and prosecute 'gangs', as well as ensure that resources were allocated to the areas affected by the problem (DCLG, 2013: 13). The police operated and oversaw the *Gangs Matrix*, a database of suspected 'gang' members to whom a risk index was assigned. Listening to a style of music commonly associated with 'gang' culture or having been a victim of 'gang'-related violence could send an individual onto that *Matrix*. The police even used social media to contact and monitor allegedly suspicious individuals, at the risk of breaching the Police Investigatory Powers Act. Noteworthy is the fact that social services had access to the data, which gave them the opportunity to closely watch the poorest and to encourage them to collaborate with the police and the judiciary. In 2017, the list included 78% of black people (while Greater London Police recorded 27% of violence committed by this community), 99% of men, and one individual aged 12. Amnesty International criticized the device, insisting on the fact that the authorities had not made it a priority to focus on the real causes of 'gangs' and to work on improving the relations between young people and the police, instead stigmatizing black youths further (Amnesty International, 2018).

In addition, in 2012, the government sought to tackle the issue of "troubled families", injecting morals, parental discipline, and individual responsibility, for people to go back to work and children back to school as well as to reduce crime. *The Troubled Families Programme* offered parenting classes for instance, as the authorities established a link between educational deficit and riots (DCLG, 2013: 16).

To epitomize the coalition's management of insecurity, the measures implemented in the aftermath of the riots partly aimed to punish and dissuade criminals, which of course was required. But they also further stigmatized the precariat and their culture, labelled them as

[6] The *Policing and Crime Act 2009,* 34 (1), was amended by the *Crime and Security Act 2010* in 2012.

deviants, criminalized social problems, and more worryingly, jeopardized democracy (Cooper, 2012: 17). In other words, the vicious circle reinforced itself, as second-class citizens were manifestly provided with additional reasons to revolt, joining 'gangs' or rioting, in which case the authorities would be in a position to retaliate once more, and so on and so forth.

In order to defeat the culture of fear taking over British streets, one may assert that Cameron established his very own brand of terror (Simon, 2009). Zero tolerance, disproportionate and questionable punishing measures, tougher law, more frequent prison sentences, increased police powers, invasive and sprawling intelligence services, and programmes reinjecting morality modified or reinforced existing arrangements – the coalition replaced the Welfare State with a Punitive State, a Janus State. The latter, on the one hand, showed itself liberal and permissive (i.e., the reassuring face) towards the middle and upper classes and firms (Wacquant, 2009b: 312). One shall remember the political scandals related to politicians' expenses or to corruption as revealed by the Murdochgate hitting the headlines at the time for example (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 3), all of which were characterized by the absence of judiciary reaction (O'Donoghue, 2014: 91). On the other hand, the state showed itself paternalistic and punishing towards the poorest (i.e., the frightening face) (Wacquant, 2009b: 312). The rights and opportunities of the weakest section of the community were therefore denied along race and class lines, while they were coerced into behaving under the aegis of a cultural trope and put under surveillance (Wresinski, 1976). The neo-Darwinist government then in power, whose agenda was a mixture of law, order, morality, and responsibility, secured a policy of "social insecurity" intrinsic to neoliberal democracy, even if it took infringing upon equality and freedom (Wacquant, 2008: 12).

In fact, the state has a criminogenic function (Jewkes, 2015: 22) – labelling, criminalizing, and punishing the deviants in the interest of the ruling class (Taylor et al., 1973), while it may violate the law with impunity. The concept of "Thug State" may be pertinently used to describe the coalition in the aftermath of the riots. Indeed, while clearly motivated by the interests of the elite, the government claimed to be democratic but perpetrated what can be considered to be criminal acts against a category of citizens and allowed such acts to be perpetrated against them. Furthermore, the coalition resorted to arrests, prison, surveillance, informers, and armed forces to dominate, discipline, and punish a non-elite population consisting of disorderly poor and minority community members, all selected to be repressed, and whose fundamental rights and opportunities were denied. Additionally, the coalition built a maximum-security society to deter civil unrests certainly generated by a lack of investment in education and social protection (Richards & Avery, 2000: 31-33). For instance, the austerity cuts imposed prior to the riots – the closure of youth centres that enable this population to keep away from 'gangs' (Alston, 2018: 14), the cuts to community projects, to voluntary groups, and **to police services, and the reduction of scholarships** – were in reality not economically but politically motivated (Henri & Hutnyk, 2013: 199). Lastly, corruption, deficiency of responsibility, and activities which, albeit legal, exploit individuals and betray their trust, characterized the action of a coalition who dominated the social and cultural spheres, and who could act with the blessing of a more intolerant public. The "Thug State"'s victims need to get organized as a means to gain political power, but the task proves highly difficult since the sustaining of divisions prevents effective mobilisation (Richards & Avery, 2000: 31-33).

Division is a pivotal device, which enables the state to rule with more ease. As it were, only a united and organized oppressed class could oppose authoritarianism successfully. The Cameron government unquestionably intensified divisions at two levels, as it invigorated the conflict between the two nations – that of the productive and that of the parasitic (i.e., the various pauper classes) (Fuchs, 2016: 167). But they also reinforced the conflict within the poorest section of the community, as the latter were submitted to both the fear of 'gangs' and riots, and the fear of government. Division within deprived community can be illustrated by the fact that in the wake of the riots, community members organized themselves to sweep streets, help businesses reopen or protect themselves, and support neighbours, sometimes with the help of outsiders (Hackney Citizen, 2011).

According to the concept of internalized oppression (Lipsky, 1987: 6), those who experience exclusion tend to direct harm towards themselves and their own community rather than towards their structural oppressors (Hagedorn, 2008: xxviii). In point of fact, 'gang' activity and rioting have been repressed by successive governments over the years, thereby generating a vicious circle. Police suspicion towards young people in depressed zones has been reinforced, and harassment has worsened indeed (Newburn et al., 2016: 216). What's more, law-abiding people inhabiting those neighbourhoods subject to near-permanent recession have increasingly been stigmatized and criminalized (Hallsworth & Silverstone, 2009: 373).

There cannot be democracy without conflict, but the intentional and persistent persecution of the poor and their culture, as well as collective punishment post August 2011, would expectedly keep a majority of opponents to the state in check, while others would retaliate by joining 'gangs' or rioting. As a result, the genuine pursuit of democracy by 'gang' members and rioters against what appeared to be a contemptuous, morally corrupt, authoritarian, repressive, regressive, and irresponsible state in a "legitimacy crisis" (Habermas, 1975; Hall, 1978: viii), namely a state privileging profit over Keynesian redistributive policies, was undoubtedly obstructed (Crouch, 2009: 395). While they were both the indicators of deep societal ills, namely the failure of Big Society, which had been announced as the antidote to "broken society" (House of Commons, 2011: 7), 'gangs' and rioters paradoxically emerged as emblems of cohesion, solidarity, and sense of community, when the government stood for the archetype of division – an intolerant broken state.

As is their ideological role, the corporate media orchestrated a moral panic for people to forget about genuine social problems (Jewkes, 2015: 22), thereby supporting the gang-based narrative emanating from Whitehall. The very powerful (right-wing) mass media (Cushion et al., 2025: 4) assuredly offered the government invaluable help for them to carry out their mission successfully, requiring zero tolerance against rioters and the remoralization of the nation, infusing the public with myths, setting to organize scapegoating and snitching campaigns (Fuchs, 2012: 384), implementing a "politics of everyday fear" (Massumi, 1993) by dramatizing violence, in other words, manipulating citizens and sustaining chaos and division to support the official governmental stance, when most urban youth violence in Britain had nothing to do with 'gangs' (Joseph & Gunter, 2011: 12).

As had been the case in the past, the media imposed a "dumbing down culture" (Jewkes, 2015: 19) with a view to deflecting concerns away from capitalism-engendered problems (Hall, 1978: 31). The public manifestly took to that propaganda, as revealed by a poll released from a sample of 2,019 individuals over 18, which revealed that 88% agreed with the sanctions

implemented against rioters and considered them to be light; that 69% held 'gangs' responsible for the riots; and that 75% supported the police (Briggs, 2011: 10).

The mass media were careful not to mention the nexus between the ecology of marginalized zones and the proportion of black youths in 'gangs', and that between social abandonment and 'gangs'. In addition, the mass media, as a rule, never reported on white 'gangs', which can be found in Northern Ireland for example. The population there being overwhelmingly white, the media would be compelled to highlight structural similarities rather than racial and cultural differences (O'Brien Castro, 2018). What's more, the mass media relied exclusively on self-styled (right-wing) experts to cover the riots and explain the 'gang' phenomenon, as sociologists or criminologists might well have contended the causes were more intricate than met the eye (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 3). Therefore, the media offered a biased narrative which concealed the fact that the coalition shirked their responsibility towards a specific category of citizens, and imperiled democracy (Pitts, 2007: 275).

Seen against this background, one may aver the government themselves were the "domestic terrorists" British people were threatened with. They manifestly deceived the population all the way through to harmful and ideological ends, distracting them, terrorizing them with the support of the mass media, evading their responsibility, imposing their Big Society project, and carrying through counterproductive plans so as to legitimize their ideology further, and keep neoliberalism vigorous: in other words, feral capitalism as the solution to its own crisis (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 13-14).

Conclusion

In essence, the coalition seemingly played its citizens by abusing an instrument of choice: 'gangs'. One may posit that they lied to British citizens: about the nature of the threat they were faced with, 'gangs', when the state and their neoliberal capitalism ideology blighted society; about the individuals who should be repressed, the poor, when allowing for exceptions, they may be regarded as victims of the state; and about their intention, tackling the 'gang' problem, when they patently had every reason to let them multiply. 'Gangs', as well as rioters, epitomized an ideological force rather than an explanation for the disturbances (Hallsworth & Brotherton, 2011: 16).

As propounded by neoliberal theorists, crises should be used to impose unpopular policies while people look the other way (Klein, 2008: 140). 'Gangs' appeared to be suitable scapegoats, as they embodied a series of race and class-related myths deeply rooted in British society on the one hand, and the imported US myth on the other hand. The mass media had the required expertise in the matter to back up the Whitehall narrative and help repress 'gangs' and rioters, while an increasingly intolerant public quite easily bought the package. Hence, the concept of state crime may be invoked. An enemy from the inside, a 'gang', can hide another indeed.

Identifying the winners and punishing the losers, a prerequisite of neoliberalism, entailed the evacuation of democracy in the aftermath of the August 2011 riots, and "the injustice machine accelerated in the cause of law and order and the safeguarding of people's rights and civic entitlements were considered an almost obscene concern" (John, 1986). Preceding Murray-inspired authorities had read downright criminality into riots as well – among whom Margaret Thatcher's governments – in spite of evidence from reports citing racial and socio-economic

disadvantage among the origins of the 1981 riots (Scarman, 1986: 196). Back then, Scarman (175) recommended urgent action so as to avoid subsequent riots but remained unheard, and disorders occurred quickly as repression was the order of the day.

40 years forward, experts such as Andrew Neilson, the director of campaigns at the British charity Howard League for Penal Reform, likewise warned that, the conditions which had induced previous revolts being similar today, rioting may well be brewing (McIntyre et al., 2021), as angered 'gang' members and rioters may endeavour to try to negotiate their position within mainstream society, empowering themselves and acting as legitimate citizens taking part in the democratic process once more, however controversially. Accordingly, the coalition appear to have been effective in what may be referred to as their secret mission to protect neoliberalism.

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