Unpalatable dissent & the political distribution of solidarity

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Abstract: This article questions the conditions in which solidarity is given or withheld in response to expressions of dissent. Drawing on the August 2011 riots in England as an example, the article reflects on why some forms of dissent attract support whereas others do not. The author argues that 'unpalatable' forms of dissent, particularly those enacted by groups already constructed as deviant or suspect, are often figured as least deserving of support, even though their actions may arise from the highest needs. The article then considers how these patterns can occur in response to more everyday articulations of dissent, such as those expressed by disenfranchised university students. The article suggests a rethinking of the politics of dissent and the distribution of solidarity in order to be more attentive to broader patterns of power and dispossession.

Keywords: dissent, riots, protest, solidarity, dispossession, racism

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For four days in August 2011 riots swept across the city of London. What initially began as a peaceful demonstration outside Tottenham police station - to protest the fatal police shooting of 29-year old Mark Duggan - soon erupted into full-scale confrontations with police, extensive property damage, and widespread looting. The anger expressed on the streets had no doubt been simmering for years against a backdrop of tense police-community relations, highly racialized stop-and-search practices, cutbacks to social services, as well as chronic poverty and unemployment -- the enduring effects of prolonged social abandonment and dispossession.[1]

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[1] Lewis, Newburn, Taylor and Mcgillivray, Reading the Riots: Investigating England's summer of disorder (The Guardian & London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012); Kawalerowicz and Biggs, 'Anarchy in the UK: Economic Deprivation, Social Disorganization, and Political Grievances in the London Riot of 2011', Social Forces 94 (2015), pp. 673-98; Stott, Drury and Reicher, 'On the Role of a Social Identity Analysis in Articulating Structure and Collective Action: The 2011 Riots in Tottenham and Hackney', The British Journal of Criminology 57 (2017), pp. 964-81.

By day three, the riots had spread to other cities across England, including Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Gloucester, Nottingham, and West Bromwich. An estimated fifteen thousand people took part in the unrest, which saw neighborhoods transformed into scenes of burning cars and buildings, smashed windows, looted shops, and angry clashes with police. Damage in the city of London alone was estimated to have totaled £300 million.[2] During the unrest, one man was shot dead in Croydon, another was attacked in Ealing and later died in hospital, and three others were run down and killed by a car in Birmingham whilst trying to protect a shop from looters.[3] Tens of thousands of police officers were deployed to take back control of the streets and more than 4700 people were arrested. The events were described as Britain's 'most significant and widespread urban unrest in at least a generation'.[4]

Media commentators on both left and right were quick to condemn the riots.[5] Despite disparate views on the root causes and heated debates about whether the riots should be described as 'political', there was near unanimity on the need to reassert a clear line between 'legitimate protest' and 'criminality pure and simple'[6]. As Labour Member of Parliament for Tooting, Sadiq Khan (later to become Mayor of London) wrote in the Evening Standard:

> [L]et's be clear: what we've witnessed across our London boroughs is not a genuine outlet of political angst, nor a reaction to police conduct. It is simply criminality on a devastating scale. There is no excuse. The people looting sports ware stores, electrical shops and department stores weren't thinking about what happened to Mark Duggan. They weren't thinking about the stagnating economy or public service cuts. Their motivation was to wreak havoc and perhaps grab a pair of trainers or a TV along the way.[7]

Khan's comments were by no means exceptional. Commentators on all sides of the political spectrum seemed to reach a vociferous consensus that the riots were

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[2] Lewis, Newburn, Taylor and Mcgillivray.

[3] The Guardian, UK riots aftermath - Friday 12 August 2011 (The Guardian, 2011). https://www.theguardian.com/uk/blog/2011/aug/12/uk-riots-day-six-aftermath Accessed 1 August 2017.

[4] Trott, 'Rebellious Subjects: The Politics of Engand's 2011 Riots - Introduction', South Atlantic Quarterly 112 (2013), pp. 538-40. See also Cadwalladr, The man accused of starting the 2011 riots, The Guardian, 26 June 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jun/26/man-accused-of-starting-2011-london-riots-mark-duggan Accessed 1 August 2017.

[5] Ciccariello-Maher, Planet of Slums, Age of Riots, Counterpunch, 2011. https://www.counterpunch.org/2011/08/12/planet-of-slums-age-of-riots/, accessed 1 August 2017.

[6] Cameron, Riots: David Cameron's Commons statement in full, BBC News, 2011. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14492789, accessed 1 August 2017.

[7] Khan, Riots are not a genuine outlet of political angst, (Evening Standard, 2011), 9 August 2011. https://www.standard.co.uk/news/riots-are-not-a-genuine-outlet-of-political-angst-6431047.html , accessed 1 August 2017.

ultimately 'devoid of any political coherence' or credibility.[8] The overarching narrative that emerged was that while the initial demonstration outside the police station fell within the proper terrain of political dissent, everything else that followed did not. While some rioters may have had legitimate grievances, most were simply opportunistic hoodlums. Either way, the rioters' discontent was not commensurate with their actions.

Even amongst prominent left commentators, efforts to diagnose the complex undercurrents of the riots were frequently eclipsed by an overarching narrative that while the underlying *causes* of the riots might have been political, the rioters *themselves* were not—at least not properly constituted political subjects. While a subsequent investigative research project, which interviewed 270 participants in the riots, found that poverty, policing, government policy, unemployment, and the killing of Mark Duggan were amongst the most important causes cited by interviewees[9], many commentators dismissed these findings as a convenient after-story to re-narrate what was in most cases little more than opportunist violence and theft.[10] These dismissals were no doubt aided by the endless media circulation of CCTV camera images of young, mostly black, partially hooded faces, splashed across major newspapers and re-circulated on social media with tabloid headlines calling for the public to identify and report these 'thugs' to police.[11] The selectivity of these images, and the racial and class stereotypes they played upon, contributed to the broader media narrative that the majority of those who participated in the unrest were out-of-control, feral youth who lacked the requisite consciousness, rhetoric or demands to credibly justify their actions on political grounds.

It was the widespread looting and property destruction in local neighborhoods that was particularly troubling to commentators.[12] Many were eager to point out that corporate stores were not the only sites of looting, but local shops were also

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[8] Younge, These riots were political.They were looting, not shoplifting. The Guardian, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/14/young-british-rioters-political-actions , accessed 1 August 2017.

[9] Lewis, Newburn, Taylor and Mcgillivray. See also Kawalerowicz and Biggs, pp. 673-98.

[10] For a detailed overview of media commentaries at the time which reiterated this sentiment, see Reicher and Stott, Mad Mobs and Englishmen? Myths and realities of the 2011 riots (London, Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2011). See also Treadwell, Briggs, Winlow and Hall, 'Shopocalypse Now: Consumer Culture and the English Riots of 2011', British Journal of Criminology 53 (2013), pp. 1-17.

[11] Daily Mail Reporter, Do you know these lotting suspects? Police release a handful of pictures (but we've found 40 more to be going on with) (The Daily Mail (Online), 2 September 2011), http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2024120/London-riots-2011-suspects-Photos-released-know-looters.html, accessed 1 August 2017.
 Accessed 1 August 2017. See also Imogen Tyler, Revolting Subjects: Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain (London, Zed Books, 2013).

[12] Newburn, Cooper, Deacon and Diski, 'Shopping for Free? Looting, Consumerism and the 2011 Riots', The British Journal of Criminology 55 (2015), pp. 987-1004.

targeted -- evidence that if the rioters had any form of political analysis they would have been more selective.[13] Likewise the looting of high-end re-sellable goods like large screen TVs, as well as brand name clothing and sneakers, were used as further evidence of selfish rather than political motivations.[14]

If anything, the actions of the rioters were deemed to be symptomatic of all that had gone wrong with contemporary social norms and values. As Zygmunt Bauman argued, the riots were a sign of 'consumerism come home to roost' with participants simply mimicking the behavior and values of elites and of consumer society at large.[15] David Harvey reached a similar conclusion: "slash and burn is now openly the motto of the ruling classes pretty much everywhere" and as such, the rioters were "only doing what everyone else is doing, though in a different way – more blatantly and visibly in the streets."[16] Slavoj Žižek and others suggested that the main enigma of the unrest was that the rioters had no clear demands. Instead their actions took the shape of "a meaningless outburst" that lacked any clear political programme; it was "impotent rage and despair masked as a display of force; it is envy masked as triumphant carnival."[17]

These diagnoses, though perhaps intended to reframe questions of individual conduct around underlying social causes, nonetheless fed into the broader assertion that the rioters were unworthy political subjects. At best, any sympathy or understanding that might be directed towards the rioters was warranted not because they were expressing any legitimate form of dissent, but because we could not expect anything better from them; their actions were simply a collateral consequence of 'feral capitalism'.[18] The few commentators who refused to follow the expected public script of explicitly condemning first and conditionally explaining second - and instead expressed sympathy for those engaged in property damage or looting - were swiftly lambasted by the media and in at least one case, an activist-columnist lost his job.[19]

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[13] Žižek, Shoplifters of the World Unite (London Review of Books, 2011). However, for evidence of more selective targeting, see Stott, Drury and Reicher, pp. 971.

[14] Treadwell, Briggs, Winlow and Hall, pp. 1-17.

[15] Bauman, The London Riots - On Consumerism Coming Home To Roost (Social Europe, 2011), https://www.socialeurope.eu/the-london-riots-on-consumerism-coming-home-to-roost , accessed 1 August 2017.

[16] Harvey, Feral Capitalism Hits the Streets (DavidHarvey.org, 2011). http://davidharvey.org/2011/08/feral-capitalism-hits-the-streets/ , accessed 1 August 2017.

[17] Žižek. See also Hall and Winlow, The English Riots of 2011: Misreadings the Signs on the Road to the Society of Enemies ed. Pritchard and Pakes, Basingstoke, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[18] Harvey.

[19] Jody McIntyre dumped as Indpendent blogger after riot comments, 8 August 2011, https://politicalscrapbook.net/2011/08/jody-mcintyre-independent/ , accessed 16 August 2017.

The widespread assertion that the riots were little more than mob violence was oddly ahistorical in the sense that such allegations failed to acknowledge how consistently this charge has been made against rioters in the past.[20] These sentiments also failed to acknowledge how commonly property destruction, takeover and theft have featured in expressions of protest throughout British history – with similar levels of outrage in response.[21]

While many comparisons were drawn to previous riots in London, most notably the Brixton Riots of 1981 and the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985, the comparison was frequently made precisely to argue that previous cases of unrest were genuinely political, whereas the contemporary riots were not. Moreover, even if the 2011 rioters' actions could be interpreted as a collective expression of rebellion against their circumstances, this malcontent was largely deemed unwarranted. As Paul Gilroy observed, "One regularly repeated popular sentiment suggested that thirty years earlier there had really been things to complain about, while nowadays, things were not so bad as to justify the rioters 'mindless violence.'"[22] There seemed to be a collective amnesia around the looting that had been present during earlier periods of unrest[23] combined with a nostalgic left lamentation for supposed days gone by when street insurrections were properly political.

There was also a general failure to recognize that the riots did not play out the same way in all locales. The unrest in some boroughs, such as Hackney and Tottenham, was characterized primarily by confrontations with police, whereas other areas such as Croydon and Ealing were more focused on looting and property destruction, which targeted the more affluent parts of the borough.[24] Likewise, participants had varying and complex motives for their involvement—as evidenced by the wide range of explanations offered by those interviewed at the time and subsequently—such that singular and simplistic explanations were bound to be inadequate.

Yet in the aftermath of the riots, much of the discussion was centered, directly and indirectly, on the question of what counts as legitimate dissent -- and the extent to which rioters were worthy of sympathy or whether they should be subject to the full force of law. In this sense, the discussions marked a reinvigoration of longstanding debates around the ever-fraught dividing line between dissent and criminality.

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[20] Debord, The Decline and Fall of the Spectale Commodity Economy (Situationalist International Online, 1966); Pearson, Hooligan: A history of respectable fears (Basingstoke and London, Macmillan Education, 1983); Reicher and Stott; Newburn, Cooper, Deacon and Diski, pp. 987-1004; Rudé, The Crowd in History: A study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848 (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1981).

[21] Pearson; Rudé; Hobsbawm, 'The Machine Breakers', Past & Present (1952), pp. 57-70.

[22] Gilroy, '1981 and 2011: From Social Democratic to Neoliberal Rioting', South Atlantic Quarterly 112 (2013), pp. 555.

[23] Newburn, Cooper, Deacon and Diski, pp. 987-1004.

[24] Reicher and Stott; Stott, Drury and Reicher, pp. 964-81.

Whether pointing to the lack of coherent demands, the unintelligibility or illegitimacy of grievances, or the regrettable form in which the dissent was expressed, the constant effort to diagnose what was wrong with the rioters was frequently reiterated in order to distinguish their actions from genuine political resistance. Yet it was the incessant reassertion of the dividing line, which ironically seemed to blur it. The almost obsessive insistence on the non-political, non-legitimate nature of the rioters seemed to expose a widespread anxiety that the contrary might be true.

Why do these debates matter so much? In part, they remain important because the place where the line is drawn between dissent and criminality is often the deciding factor in broader questions of political and social solidarity. These lines determine who will be defended and who will not, who will be supported and who will be abandoned and ostracized. Certainly the rush of (mostly white, middle class) community members to join the 'broom brigade' to clean up the streets in the aftermath of the riots was not paralleled by a rush to offer legal defense and community resources to the (mostly non-white, working class) rioters facing harsh prison sentences.[25] If dissent generates high stakes consequences – in this case five deaths, businesses and homes destroyed, lives ruined by criminal records and prison sentences, and communities divided in the aftermath—then the need for support and solidarity is high, regardless of whether one condones the original actions. Otherwise, those who bear the brunt of the fallout—be it those who participated in the riots or those forced to deal with the after-effects (often overlapping constituencies)—will be left with a burden that is likely to exacerbate and entrench the very power relations and social animosities that contributed to the riots in the first place.

In this sense, the question of whether the riots or the rioters should be deemed 'political' per se, might be less important than what the debates themselves reveal about the contemporary boundaries of legitimate and worthy dissent. At the heart of these debates is much more than a 'correct' diagnosis of the specific events that took place in August 2011; at stake are much larger questions around how the drawing of these boundaries shape the terms, possibilities and expectations for political and social solidarity more broadly. The stories that are told about the riots matter not only with respect to the question of who should or should not be subject to state punishment, but also contribute to the re-articulation of broader lines between the deserving and the undeserving; between those entitled to sympathy and understanding and those relegated to state-sanctioned social abandonment and dispossession.

Arguably, the broader political terrain upon which acts of dissent are heard, understood and responded to has changed significantly over the past few decades. As Paul Gilroy suggested, the differences in perception towards the riots of the

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[25] Ministry of Justice (UK), Statistical bulletin on the public disorder of 6th to 9th August 2011 - September 2012 update (Justice Statistic Analyitical Services, Ministry of Justice, 2012).

1980s versus those of 2011 reveal how vastly the political landscape had shifted between the two periods of unrest:

> The depth of the neoliberal revolution that Britain had undergone during the three intervening decades was conveyed above all by the way that the new norms specified by generalized individuation and privatization were able to reframe the disorders as a brisk sequence of criminal events and transgressions that could be intelligible only when seen on the scale of personal conduct. Similarly, repairing the damage accomplished by the rioters was not primarily a social phenomenon but rather a matter of individual responsibility. Society had been abolished long ago.[26]

Understood within this broader lens, it seems that the very terms upon which determinations of 'proper and legitimate' dissent are made—and in turn the basis upon which the distribution of social and political solidarity is given—have become ever more narrow.

When contrasting the government responses to the 1981 and 2011 riots, the former arguably resulted in more significant legal reforms, as prompted by the Scarman Report. Despite its tacit re-inscription of notions of black criminality and an unwillingness to acknowledge institutional racism as a problem in policing,[27] the Scarman Report nonetheless recognized key failures in policing and in turn generated a number of important law and policy changes. This included reforms to stop and search practices, funding to address urban poverty and racial disadvantage, and the creation of the Police Complaints Authority (later to become the Independent Police Complaint Commission). The 2011 riots, by contrast, resulted largely in a withdrawal of social supports, a reassertion of individual responsiblization discourses and an extension of punitive law and order regimes.

These differential responses raise a number of larger questions. Namely, what do we see, hear and recognize as dissent? What conditions make some grievances rendered intelligible as dissent and others dismissed as unjustified unruliness, bad behavior or criminality? By what criteria is dissent differentiated from other expressions of discontent? What are the wider implications of how these boundaries are drawn?

Ultimately I want to pose these questions as they pertain to broader patterns of racialised social exclusion and the processes by which particular groups of people become subject to what Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[28] Certainly groups who are criminalized and imprisoned are

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[26] Gilroy, pp. 550-8.

[27] See Gilroy, There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Polics of Race and Nation (London, Routledge, 1987/2002).

[28] Gilmore, Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2007), p. 247.

among those whose life chances are significantly diminished, as are those whose voices are not heard, whose experiences are denied and whose material conditions subject them to ever worsening levels of social deprivation. Hence, the assertion of narrow boundary lines for determining what kinds of dissent are worthy of defense versus those that may be criminalized, dismissed or demonized can be understood as a part of the wider conditions by which racial and class inequalities are tacitly permitted, normalized and reinforced—not only by right wing discourses, but by also by seemingly 'progressive' and 'leftwing' politics.[29]

In this case, the consequences of rioters' criminal convictions extended well beyond their actual sentences and impacted the ability to secure basic needs such as housing, employment and education. Immediately following the riots, for example, the UK government introduced new legislation to enable landlords to evict any tenant who had participated in a riot – even if the riot did not take place in the vicinity of the residence in question.[30] The government also introduced new 'mandatory grounds of eviction' whereby courts lose discretion and are *required* to order evictions when certain conditions are met, including breaches of anti-social behavior injunctions.[31] In such circumstances, the evicted tenant can be considered to have made themselves 'voluntarily homeless' (on that grounds that they should have foreseen the consequences of their behavior) and thereby lose all entitlement to social housing.[32] While it is not yet clear how frequently these new powers have been used, the legislation itself marks a broader trend in the escalation of state-sanctioned social abandonment of criminalized people. There were also calls to withdraw social assistance payments from any families whose members were involved in the riots – a call that was not implemented but undoubtedly contributed to a broader punitive mood.[33] In this sense, the wider implications of not defending the rioters (in part by constructing them as indefensible) had wide-ranging consequences, with the effects most adversely impacting those already most socially disadvantaged.

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[29] I recognize that the categories of 'left' and 'right' are contested and problematic, as is the label of 'progressive politics', but they are nonetheless useful here as broad terms by which to identify key differences in political values.

[30] Under Section 99 of the *Anti-social Behavior, Crime and Policing Act 2014*, landlords may evict a tenant if they have been convicted of an offence committed at the scene of a riot anywhere in the UK. See also, UK Government - Department for Communities and Local Government, Strengthening Powers of Possession for Anti-Social Behaviour: Summary of responses to consultation and next steps (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012).

[31] These conditions include circumstances where a tenant, a member of the tenant's household, or a tenant's guest, is convicted of a serious offence that occurred in the locality of the dwelling or occurred elsewhere but against a person who lives in the locality. See Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

[32] UK Government - Department for Communities and Local Government.

[33] Tyler.

Part of the indefensibility of the rioters stemmed from the fact that they expressed their discontent in an unpalatable form; their actions did not fit within the standard repertoires of legitimate dissent that the left has traditionally romanticized and valorized. The rioters were seen as militant, but not disciplined; impulsive rather than organized; expressive but not articulate; targeted but not strategic. Their actions involved group collaboration, but not collective mobilization. Overall, their actions were messy, incoherent and chaotic, their motives inconsistent and mixed. The mode, expression and targets of their dissent generated discomfort, unease and tension.

Yet tension arguably lies at the heart of every expression of dissent. It is precisely the sense of friction that arises from the withdrawing of consent, the articulation of defiance, and the interruption of 'business-as-usual' that differentiates dissent from mere disagreement. In his famous 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail', Martin Luther King Jr. writes about the importance of tension as a strategic means for change. "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored."[34] Of course, King was careful to distinguish between violent and non-violent direction action, 'earnestly opposing' the former, while advocating the latter. Yet the basic premise – of using dissent to force a confrontation in situations where those in power have refused to listen and failed to negotiate – has some resonance with the situation of the 2011 rioters. In a widely quoted news clip, a young man in Tottenham was asked if rioting actually achieved anything. "Yes," he said. "You wouldn't be talking to me now if we didn't riot, would you?" He went on to explain: "Two months ago we marched to Scotland Yard, more than 2,000 of us, all blacks, and it was peaceful and calm and you know what? Not a word in the press. Last night a bit of rioting and looting and look around you."[35]

Indeed, one might argue that the contemporary political landscape is one where the opportunities for traditional forms of civil disobedience are far more limited—by virtue of heightened security controls, surveillance technologies and anti-protest laws which makes such actions increasingly less feasible but also because of a broader sense of political malaise and disillusionment. For many, conventional strategies of protest are seen as much less effective than they once were, at least in the sense that governments are both more able to ignore protestors on the one hand and criminalize them on the other.[36] Particularly for those who feel alienated formal politics or who reject the social controls and bourgeois values regularly

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[34] King, Letter from a Birmingham Jail (The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, 1963).
[35]Fletcher, The sad truth behind the London riot (NBC News, 2011).
[36] Power, 'Dangerous Subjects: UK Students and the Criminalization of Protest', South Atlantic Quarterly 111 (2012), pp. 412-20; El-Enany, 'Innocence Charged with Guilt': The Criminalisation of Protest from Peterloo to Millbank ed. Pritchard and Pakes, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

imposed them, public disorder can itself be a form of protest.[37] So it is perhaps not surprising that some participants in the riots may have been partially driven by a sense of political apathy turned into recklessness and a desire to taste power on the streets—even if only momentarily and at high social costs.

It may be that the conventional image of dissent that circulates in the popular political imagination does not adequately map on to the gritty reality of dissent expressed on the streets. Arguably the left has long held a rather romanticized view of dissent, particularly in the figure of the righteous political leader whose courageous acts of civil disobedience express clearly and strategically targeted opposition to oppression. Yet it is important to remember that these popularized expressions of dissent are often far more greatly revered *after the fact*, than at the time. The actions of figures such as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, Che Guevera and Nelson Mandela are now portrayed as heroic dissenters (often cast in popular culture in their most palatable and least radical form) even though at the time, their actions were far less well received and far more controversial.

Perhaps we like the *idea* of dissent more than we like dissent itself. We like the spectacle of dissent, more than the actual experience of it. We enjoy consuming films, music and cultural images that depict the heroic figure of the rebel, the activist, the dissenter, but we are less keen when dissent is actually in our midst. Particularly when dissent is directed towards us, or when it makes our lives inconvenient or difficult, or when it turns out to be messy and unruly, it becomes far less palatable. It is easy to be self-righteous about dissent when it is far away or targeted at someone else; much less so when the dissent is directed our way.

Similarly, although challenging the criminalization of dissent has long been a staple of left-wing politics, this critique is often selectively applied; it is often limited to those who actions and identities fit within particular repertoires of dissent. Those whose expressions of dissent are chaotic and complex, those who do not fit the more romanticized notions of resistance, or those who straddle the line between deserving and undeserving are unlikely to enjoy the benefits of collective support. Particularly among the mainstream left, political leaders must increasingly distance themselves from groups engaged in law-breaking behavior rather than critique the conditions that produce law breaking behavior itself—no doubt part of much broader trends where political credibility is increasingly undermined by any association with those characterized as criminals. Hence the form of dissent, and its proximity to criminalization, matters increasingly more than the circumstances or impetus for dissent.

In a similar way that many feminists, particularly black feminists, have been accused of being 'too angry' when they express their dissent, a critique of the mode of

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[37] See for example, Tomsen's discussion of drinking violence as 'a form of symbolic protest again aspects of bourgeois morality', in A Top Night: Social Protest, Masculinity and the Culture of Drinking Violence, *The British Journal of Criminology* 1997, 37 (1): 90-102.

delivery can used to displace or deflect from the substance of the dissenting view. Like a bureaucratized complaints system, only those who follow procedures properly will have their grievance considered. Those who do not follow the expected protocols will be rejected or denied their hearing. Even those who express their complaints within the requirements but do so in a way that exceeds convention – those who do not behave as expected – will have their grievance dismissed.

In a more mundane and less spectacular context, I am mindful of my own students who are sometimes chastised for the ways they express their dissent. I work at an institution that has a commitment to widening access to education, where a high proportion of our students come from impoverished and highly disadvantaged backgrounds. Their life experiences have taught them that they have to fight for almost everything they need. Many have come to expect that they will frequently be denied what they are entitled to, whether it be welfare, access to services or employment. They have learned in their daily lives that the promise of access or success that is available to others will not actually be available to them.[38] They have learned that when they are denied something it will often be justified in a way that places the responsibility entirely on their shoulders. Over time their default position sometimes becomes a defensive one; they must be prepared for being denied what they need and in turn, ready to fight for those needs. So when something goes wrong in the education setting, some react strongly and fiercely. In such situations, these students are seen as 'difficult', 'demanding' or 'needy' in contrast to those students whose lives of class and racial entitlement means that they can express their grievances more amicably, precisely because they are accustomed to getting what they need and want. Hence the students who are often most able to express dissent through 'the proper channels' or by 'the correct means' are also frequently the students with access to the most resources and privilege. Those with the most precarious lives and the least time and resources, those struggling with a variety of complex issues, whose patience has finally run out, sometimes react in ways that are unpalatable to the institution. While higher education staff may deem those students to be trouble-makers or 'problem students', by another view they are engaged in survival strategies.

The disavowal of these everyday expressions dissent, though seemingly far from the reactions to rioters, arguably fit within a broader continuum where the dividing lines between deserving and undeserving subjects become ever more stringent; such quotidian dismissals work to normalize and re-entrench wider commonsense notions of what can be heard as legitimate dissent. Indeed, the increasingly punitive reactions to formal student protests – most evident in the criminal responses to the 2010 wave of student occupations, direct actions and protest marches in the UK which challenged the slashing of higher education funding and the dramatic raising

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[38] Certainly, access to education does not necessarily translate into success, as revealed by current statistics on retention, attainment and post-education employment, which continue to demonstrate significant differentials along class, race and gender and disability lines.

of tuition fees[39] —fit a pattern whereby those whose actions are deemed 'uncivil' are more readily demonized for the ways they express dissent.

Sara Ahmed writes about this when she describes "the problem of becoming the problem because you are trying to address a problem that others do not wish to recognize as a problem."[40] We turn the one who raises the problem into the problem itself. Here Ahmed is specifically writing about the challenge of confronting sexual harassment in institutions, not the dilemmas of riots. Yet there are parallels to the ways in which unpalatable expressions of dissent, which arise in response to deeper problems, are translated into the main problem itself. Criminalizing and demonizing rioters becomes a way to recast the problem as bad behavior warranting individual punishment, rather than a set of wider issues for which broader social responsibility needed to be taken. Such translation arguably becomes possible when the terms by which dissent is defined and heard are so narrow that we cannot hear or recognize expressions that exceed our expected comfort zone. If riots are 'the language of the unheard', one of the questions to be considered is not just what the unheard are trying to say, but why others do not – or cannot – hear it. It is easy to support those who actions follow our expected scripts of dissent. But what about the expressions of dissent that are hard to hear, that are less palatable to digest, that force us to confront things we would rather not deal with?

Of course, many would argue that it is dangerous to define political dissent too broadly.[41] To treat rioters on par with those who explicitly organize under a specific political banner is to potentially devalue and undermine the importance of organized consciousness raising and collective organizing. No doubt it is important to distinguish between those who have an explicit sense of political consciousness – and those who are simply reacting against the conditions or circumstances that they find themselves in. That difference can be the determining factor between an eruption that can be easily quelled and the beginnings of a powerfully organized political mobilization. But this is perhaps precisely why we need to listen differently and more carefully to the expressions of dissent that challenge expectations. Social movements capable of bringing about change are certainly not built without consciousness, but they are often triggered and bolstered from moments and expressions of dissent, albeit incoherent and sometimes not-fully-formed sentiments.

Yet lines need to be drawn somewhere and not all dissent is equal or defensible. There is no shortage of examples of reactionary dissent and backlash to progressive social change. In that sense, dissent is not an inherent 'good' in and of itself. Dissent always occurs in relation to something – and the content and context of what is being objected to matters greatly. So the question remains as to what criteria determines the boundaries of legitimate dissent. However, the question I wish to

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[39] Power, pp. 412-20.

[40] Ahmed, Wound Up (feministkilljoys.com, 2017), https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/01/04/wound-up/, accessed 1 August 2017.

[41] Hall and Winlow, p. 108.

foreground here is the way in which these distinctions affect the distribution of political solidarity. The question is not just about how and why these lines get drawn, but with what consequence and for whom.

I am reminded of the distinction between 'political prisoners' and 'social prisoners'. I, like many others, am troubled by these categorizations. While acknowledging that there is a particular significance in being locked up explicitly for the expression of one's political beliefs or actions, these categories tend to rest on problematic distinctions between deserving and undeserving – namely that it is easier to make the case that people should not be locked up for their politics than for those who have broken the law in the context of their economic or social status. Underpinning the distinction is a sense that political prisoners are not like 'real criminals' and while the former do not 'deserve' to be in prison, the latter implicitly do. So while the distinction is often aimed to generate support and solidarity for the former, it frequently leads to the social abandonment of the latter. Many prisoner justice activists have raised this issue by challenging the limits of individually-focused campaigns used to address the problem of mass incarceration. Attempts to focus on the most deserving prisoners – those whose cases are most likely to garner public sympathy—tend to prioritize either the wrongfully convicted or those whom Marie Gottschalk calls the 'non, non, nons' (i.e. prisoners convicted for non-violent, non-serious, non-sexual offences).[42] But in doing so, challenging the broader logics of the prison system itself are jettisoned in favor of a focus on individual cases. Moreover, it is often those who are designated as the least deserving who are most likely to be the most vulnerable to violence and the most in need of support. In this sense, the political distribution of solidarity as allocated to those who are deemed most deserving may not correspond to those most in need.

Another underlying difficulty is that the impetus to express solidarity is inevitably structured by the 'we' formation; we tend to care most about those who we already deem most 'like us', those to whom we see ourselves as most closely connected or related. For this reason Iris Marion Young argues that 'Political theorists and activists should distrust this desire for reciprocal recognition and identification with others ... because it denies difference in the concrete sense of making it difficult for people to respect those with whom they do not identify.'[43] As such, the motivation to express solidarity cannot be easily disentangled from the broader social norms that construct some subjects as inherently worthy of concern and others as fundamentally undeserving.

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[42] Gottschalk, Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), 165.

[43] Young, 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference', Social Theory and Practice 12 (1986), pp. 12. See also David's Garland discussion of the 'criminology of the self' and 'criminology of the other' in Garland, The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), pg 137.

Yet expressions of social and political solidarity need not be conditional upon the endorsement or acceptance of the actions, beliefs or values of the individual or group in question. Solidarity in its most basic form might simply mean an expression of opposition against harsh treatment, a stance against social abandonment. It might mean taking a position that focuses less on the merits of individual actions and more on the broader social consequences that expressions of solidarity versus non-solidarity might generate. In other words, one does not need to celebrate or valorize the actions of the 2011 rioters to question the reactionary responses, which subsequently enabled the punishment and social abandonment of individuals from some of the most disadvantaged groups in the country. The conditional linking of support and solidarity to those expressing dissent in exclusively worthy and legitimate ways meant that those most in need of solidarity were least likely to receive it.

Arguably, political solidarity is often most needed where it is least easily given. For this reason, it is precisely the forms of unpalatable dissent – the disquieting dissent, the unruly and disorderly dissent, the expressions that generate tension and discomfort—that warrant the most careful attention and reflection. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, the word "dissidence" derives from the Latin *dis*—"apart" and *sedere* "to sit." "The dissident is the one who sits apart."[44] For those whose dissent is easily recognized and condoned, by sitting apart from one situation or group they also sit together with others. Those who attend a public demonstration to 'sit apart' from government policy are at the same time sitting together with others who share their dissent. But what about those who sit alone, or have no one to sit with? What about those with no seat at all? Those are the dissenters for whom the question of the distribution of political solidarity potentially matters most.

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