Viewpoint

The broken middle: The space of the London riots

Jeremy Till *

University of Westminster, 35 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5LS, UK

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This viewpoint looks at the 2011 London riots, and in particular interprets them against a discussion of their urban location. In contrast to previous riots, which generally have happened either in urban centres or urban margins, the London riots happened in the everyday areas of the city, along borderlines between areas of different social inequality. The article centres on riots being seen as a magnification of the ordinary rather than an outburst of the extraordinary, and then discusses the spatial and social implications of this interpretation.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

One of my favourite maps is the one published in City of Quartz by Mike Davis. It shows the gang territories in South Central Los Angeles in 1972 (Davis, 1990). Particularly fascinating is the way that the areas designated to each gang overlap, so that small areas appear contested by two, or in one case, three gangs. One can but wonder what these spaces are like by night, by day, over time. Although diagrammatic, the map throbs with incipient violence and a sense that these hard black lines are in a state of continual flux, as the control of streets and back alleys pass from one gang to another. But it is not only the overlaps that make this map so compelling: it is also the way that in some places the gang territories are clearly separated, as if a truce has been made not to fight for that particular stretch; in other places there are zones claimed by no one, probably the most dangerous places of all in the turbulence of rival occupations.

Maps hold within them the intersection of space and potential action, which is why it is so easy to get lost in them, as one's imagination rushes in to project lively scenarios out of dead lines. Maps can only ever be suggestive of the connection of space and action, since they only ever present a partial reading of a given territory. They are best read as diagrams of contingent stories than they are as authoritative statements of spatial and social actuality. It is in this provisional sense that I enter into the mapping of the recent London riots, in order to speculate on the way they might describe the relationship of space to the action within. As Wouter Vanstiphout noted in a talk soon after the events,

"riots reveal things about our city that we have hesitated to look at before."[1] Following this line of argument, studying the space of riots becomes a means of understanding the underlying city since they bring to the surface what is usually suppressed. The mapping of riots can thus be seen as a mapping of the latent socio-spatial conditions of our cities, but only if one remains open in one's interpretations of those maps.

My speculative approach to maps is very different to that of the Space Syntax group, who have used maps in a manner that is almost entirely determinist. In the case of the London riots this leads to a very unfortunate analysis (Space Syntax Network, 2011). Their headline finding is that "84% of verified incidents in north London and 96% in south London took place within a five minute walk of both (a) an established town centre and (b) a large post-war housing estate." Well, that might be true, but the underlying explanation is less palatable. There are vague mentions of Bill Hillier's work on housing estates and his "conjectures" that "the overly complex spatial layout of these housing estates has an effect on social patterns, often leading to social malaise and anti-social behaviour." It looks as if we are meant to surmise that the spatial experience of living on these estates somehow programmes the residents to venture forth and take it out on their local high streets.

Not only is this research flawed (in so much as other maps clearly indicate that the rioters did not necessarily come from the immediate neighbourhood, but in many cases travelled some

---

* Tel.: +44 20 7911 5130.
E-mail address: j.till@westminster.ac.uk

[1] In a talk at the Building Centre organized by NLA (New London Architecture) on 9th September 2011.
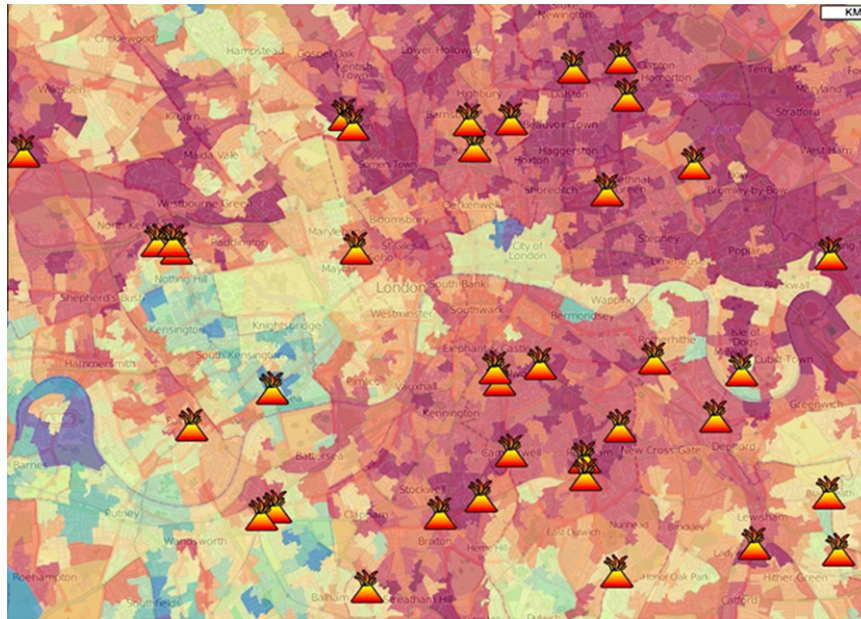
Fig. 1. Map of location of 2011 London riots.

distance, alerted by messages sent through the BlackBerry Messaging System[2]) but also it is unacceptably reductive in its conclusions. The Space Syntax researchers first state that "most post-war housing estates have been designed in such a way that they create over-complex, and as a result, under-used spaces." These spaces are populated by large groups "of unsupervised children and teenagers, where peer socialization can occur between them without the influence of adults." And then, within the same paragraph, they assert: "our analysis of court records shows that almost three quarters of convicted rioters in the study areas live on large post-war housing estates." We are meant to imply from this a causal link between space and behaviour, in this particular case the spatiality of post-war housing estates and the act of rioting; this is a causality that apparently overrides the social and political backdrop.

This form of spatial determinism has been encountered before in the analysis of riots, most famously in the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985, where a whole series of commentators weighed in to make the association between decaying estates and the 'resulting' riots. Thus the book *Community Architecture* by Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt opens with an apocalyptic description of the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985, when "violence erupted" on a North London housing estate.

> As families and the elderly cowered in their homes, gangs of youth – armed with bricks, knives, bottles and petrol bombs – confronted hundreds of police armed with riot shields and batons. What had been thought of as a model housing estate on its completion only twelve years previously became, for several hours, a battleground (Wates & Knevitt, 1987, p. 15).

By setting their analysis against an architectural backdrop, the authors suggest that there was "a possible link between social unrest and the degree of control that people have over their environment" (Wates & Knevitt, 1987, p. 16). The book then proceeds with a benign introduction to community architecture. The argument is never explicitly made, but the implication of this hysterical opening of social unrest is clear: modernist architecture, because of its

remote and irresponsible genesis, is the cause of social breakdown; community architecture, with its engaged and democratic genesis, will overcome these ills. Space Syntax and this version of community architecture are unlikely bedfellows, but are joined here in their architectural determinism, which all too conveniently overlooks the political and social, and in this plays into the hands of politicians who are all too glad to have other factors as an explanation of social disturbance. Architectural arrogance, spatial complexity, blind alleys – all these and more shift the responsibility out of political hands and onto other more instrumental factors.

Let's use Georg Simmel to reverse out of this cul-de-sac of architectural determinism: "the city is not a spatial entity with sociological consequences, but a sociological entity that is formed spatially" (Simmel, 1997, p. 143). Space arises out of – or in Lefebvre's term is produced by – the social, rather than the determinist reverse in which the social arises out of the spatial. In this light one approaches maps or architectural plans not as instruments of potential behaviour, but in the spirit of an archeologist who attempts to summon up lost lives from splinters of material and spatial evidence. Space Syntax's UCL colleagues in the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis are particularly useful here with their generous open source maps, Maptube, one of which overlays the location of the riots onto a map of social inequality in London (CASA, 2011). This particular map (Fig. 1), which smudges computer game graphics of the instant onto the apparently precise statistical evidence of the given, challenges previous assumptions about the constitution of riots.

Spatially, riots may be placed into two broad categories. First the riots that take place within the most socially deprived areas and are defined by their boundaries. Second riots that take place in city centres, bringing the excluded directly into confrontation with the spaces they are normally excluded from. The first group includes the Broadwater Farm riot of 1985, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 (which were centred on the South Central area of Mike Davis' map), and the Parisian banlieue riots of 2005. The second group includes the Manchester riots of 2011, the London Poll Tax riots of 1989 and the Detroit riots of 1967, (which started with a local altercation but rapidly, spread out to the neighboring University district). The first group of riots are the most easily for the establishment to manage, both practically (because they can be

---

[2] "An analysis of one day's court hearings by BBC Newsnight last week found 70% of those accused of riot-related crimes had travelled from outside their area." As quoted in Guardian (2011).

contained) and politically (because there is always close to the surface the implication that this is what poor/black/unemployed people do, and it can't be helped. Sarkozy's infamous labeling of the Parisian banlieue rioters as 'racaille' is indicative of this attitude, 'racaille' being a much worse term than the 'scum' it is normally translated to, because in French it designates a subhuman, inherently evil, grouping who are therefore by implication beyond the help or the responsibility of the state).

Out of sight, out of mind, the peripheral riots are of less of a worry to the mainstream: with the dispossessed just beating each other up and destroying their own worlds, the rest of us can carry on relatively untroubled. The second set of riots, those which take on the centre spatially and conceptually, are more of a problem, which is why they are treated with such institutional ferocity, for example in the Poll Tax riots in London's Trafalgar Square, or when an initially peaceful demonstration that presents the merest threat of escalation is subjected to techniques such as kettling in the 2010 London student demonstrations and the spraying of mace on innocent women in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street events. But in presenting such an affront to the establishment, the rampant riots in the centre also tend to effect real change. Thus the Poll Tax riots are largely seen as a lever in the fall of Margaret Thatcher, and the Detroit riots led to a tripling of outward migration of whites from the city.

The maps of the London riots, however, fit neither of these patterns. With one conspicuous exception, they were not concentrated in the heart of an area with the highest social deprivation nor do they occur in the city centre; they are dispersed across the city, and the majority of the riots are located on the boundaries of areas of differing social indicators.[3] The exception is Tottenham, where the initial riot broke out. The focused trigger for that (the protest against the killing by the police of Mark Duggan) was very different from eruptions on subsequent nights, which were precipitated in a seemingly arbitrary manner. If Tottenham was contained within an area of high social deprivation, in the manner of previous riots, the subsequent ones occurred at points where different demographics rubbed up against each other. Fault lines is probably too sensational a term, because it suggests places of radical difference waiting to erupt as the almost inevitable outcome of social or spatial conditioning. London boundaries are less exceptional – until quite recently it was rare to see gated communities or other aspects of clear socio-spatial segregation (Minton, 2009). London does indeed have the broadest spread on social indicator scales, containing the very rich and the very poor, but these differences are not expressed as clearly as in other cities, where typically the rich and poor dwell apart in clearly defined areas. The London map of social deprivation reads as a restless patchwork rather than as a set of neat zones. In many ways it is exactly this mix that gives the city its vibrancy and diversity. But, it would appear, it is also this mix that underscored the 2011 London riots. In contrast, the maps of the other cities where the 2011 riots took place (Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham) show a more conventional demarcation between centre, poor areas and rich areas. In these cities the riots generally followed the bipolar pattern of being located either in the centre or the most deprived areas. In London the pattern of the

underlying social deprivation is different, and so also, it appears, is the pattern of the rioting.

The London map shows that the riots did not occur in places defined by their difference from the norm – the grand centre or the excluded margin – but in places characterized by their ordinariness. The slightly down-at-heel high street location of most of the riots is so typical of London that its citizens take it for granted, quietly enjoying the muddle of ethnic shops, nail parlours, discount shoe shops, pound stores and so on (even if outsiders are baffled that such extensive scruffiness is so apparent in a great world city). Although often existing on marginal economies, and used by the socially excluded, these high streets are very different from the contained pockets of poverty that were the focus of riots in other cities; they are connected and diverse where the latter are isolated and homogenous. These streets are not the centres of civic life in terms of the grand public institutions of the city centre, nor of business life, in the sense of the central business districts of the modern city; rather, they are the nexus of ordinary life, of daily shopping, of local trades, and day-to-day socializing. As such they provide a vestige of public space that has largely been eradicated from the rest of our cities. Surveilled they might be, but they are not locked away from the rest of the city. 'Higher' commerce has been removed and corralled into the privatized shopping centres. One makes special trips to shopping centres, whereas the local street is just there, available as a setting for everyday life; available, it transpires, as a setting for rioting.

What the riots did was to collapse the distance between the extraordinary and the ordinary, with extreme action happening in the most everyday of spaces. As Sam Jacob has argued in a brilliant op-ed, the riots "intensified unexceptional activities and spaces of the city such as leisure, high streets, desire, and pleasure. They transformed these everyday urban activities into an exceptional state of unlawfulness" (Jacob, 2011). The almost hysterical reaction to the riots may be attributed to this overlaying of the extraordinary on the ordinary: the unpredictability of their inception and the feeling that they could happen almost anywhere – a't the end of my street', one heard so many people say at the time – led to an understandable fear and sense of unease. This sense of unease was exacerbated by the dispersal, speed and fluidity of the riots. The London riots were not centred on a particular space or object: as Jacob notes, "while the traditional form of riot has a target, here it was centreless, with no middle and no edge" (Jacob, 2011).

In their matching of the haphazard, dispersed and diverse spatiality of the everyday city, the London riots can clearly be read as the "intensification of an underlying situation."[4] The riots were not an event in a space or time set apart - they even started to take by place by day, countering the more typical manifestation of nighttime riots, in which flames, silhouettes and partial vision combine into a filmic spectacle of fear and apocalypse. No, the London riots were a magnification of what was there already. It is this that made them so unsettling at the time, and it is this that gives them such a menacing legacy. There is a continuing apprehension that if, apart from initial shooting of Mark Duggan, the other riots started with such apparent ease and randomness, what is to stop them erupting again? What might be the next trigger for the intensification of the underlying? And if they do erupt again, then what might stop them? Targeted riots bring with them the solution in the form of getting rid of or dissolving the target: Council Tax replaces Poll Tax, Broadwater Farm is given a social and spatial makeover. However, these London riots in all their banality and lack of clear target are much less easy to address. Hence their reduction by politicians to 'criminality, pure and simple', because criminality can be 'simply' dealt with through

---

[3] A visual, and not completely rigorous analysis of the map shows the following adjacencies at, or within a street of, the riot location, where 1 refers to most socially deprived areas up to 10 as the least, on the index of social deprivation: Ealing 3-6, 1-4-6; Willesden 1-2-4; Ladbroke Grove 2-5, 2-7, 2-4; Fulham 3-4: Chelsea 5-8; Wandsworth 3-5; Tooting 3-3; Streatham 2-3, 2-4; Brixton 1-2; Camberwell 1-2; Peckham 1-2, 1-1; Walworth 1-2: Southwark 1-2- 3; Isle of Dogs 1-3-6; Newham 1-1; Blackheath 4-6-7; Ladwell 1-2, 3-5; Woolwich 1-2; Canning Town 1-6; Barking 1-3, 2-2; Bethnal Green 1-2; Bakring 1-3; Ilford 1-3; Hackney 1-2; Dalston 1-1 (but closer reading indicate riots were outside the poorest housing estate); Islington 2-3, 2-2; Tottenham 1-1; Walthamstow 2-3, 1-2, 2-5; Enfield 4-5-9; Ponders End 2-3, Waltham Abbey 5-5; Romford 2-5.

[4] As Jedidjah de Vries has noted. http://j-dv.org/writings/essays/riot.pdf.

the law. And hence their reduction by Space Syntax to spatial determinism, because that sows the seeds of a spatial solution. In the end a combination of mass arrests, citizen action and media outcry on the one hand, and a sense of dwindling energy and opportunity on the other (after all there is no adrenalin rush in beating up the same sad street more than once), meant that the London riots petered out after four days, but this is hardly a long-term or sustainable solution.

Which brings us back to the maps, to see if they can provide further clues. The location of the riots along the seams of the patchwork of the map of social deprivation suggests the problem is more complex than if they were located in the middle of blocks of homogenous social deprivation. In the middle, the issue of cause and effect is containable and potentially treatable. Along the seams it is less easy to pin down. Seams both join and separate the pieces of a patchwork, and in this duality are different to traditional borders, which only separate and have conditions for crossing. The seams of social deprivation trace rhizomically across the map of London, the legacy of migration, joining-up of villages, grouping around trading centres, food supply and myriad other historical traits. The riots did not occur where the very red (the poorest) come against the very blue (the richest); if they had, then we could have read them as a form of class war. Equally if the targets had been the emporia of the rich, we could have read the riots as a form of plebian revolt, or if the institutions of the powerful, as a form of revolutionary action. Instead the riots happened along streets and in stores that were known to the rioters as part of their everyday life; not an exceptional revolution but an all-but-normal eruption. They took place along the seams between sometimes only marginally differentiated demographics, and the targets were the stores of mass produced consumer goods (trainers, flat screen televisions) and distraction (alcohol, computer games). This leads us to other readings than the simple them and us. First, the rhizomic seams in their ambiguity of joining and separating, and in their provisionality as demarcations, provide a perfect setting for the fluid and open-ended maneuvers that took place along them. The form of the riots is conjoined with the form of the space; whilst the spatiality of the seams clearly did not cause the riots, it certainly enabled their very particular character to develop. Secondly, the location on the boundaries of differing social deprivation suggest that the riots were at heart a spatialisation of the ramping up of social inequality. In the 2000s, social indices showed a stretching of the line between those who have and those that don't. The London riots did not bring the ends of the line into confrontation, rather they operated along its now extended length, in which differences were, and are, ever more exaggerated. The locations of the riots were at places where the line of social inequality was stretched to breaking; not at the extremes, but in the spaces where previously benign normality had been distorted by the fatal intersection of the scarcity of means and abundance of desire, the latter driven by the prevailing spectacle of consumption. If Zygmunt Bauman is right in identifying a "combination of consumerism with rising inequality" as the backdrop to the riots (Bauman, 2011), then these humdrum London streets of the broken middle become their natural location. Shepherded and monitored in the privatized spaces of shopping malls and alienated by the civic spaces of the city centre, the dispossessed gravitated towards the easy targets of the possessors. The high street is the perfect territory for the riots in providing the booty and also in their joining-separating role – both providing smooth connections in and out to other areas, and giving enough frisson in their division between somewhat, but not totally, demarcated areas.

The implications of this interpretation are sobering. The riots emerged in the bits of the city that have escaped privatization, and which retain, despite surveillance and policing, a public life of the everyday. To say that the riots are the price that we have to pay if we want to maintain any semblance of public life is to suggest an awful, and publicly unacceptable, truth. To embrace civic space we have to accept conflict within it. The broken middle where the riots erupted is not easily fixed; social inequality is stretching not reducing, the spectacle of consumption ever more shiny. The conditions remain in place for the intensification of the everyday to reemerge at any point. The knee jerk reaction is to tighten the grip on those spaces – to police them more, to introduce more surveillance, to further privatize them. However, my interpretation points in exactly the opposite direction. We need to learn from the bravery of the Norwegian Prime Minister, who after the appalling 2011 massacre by Anders Breivik, said immediately that the country needed more democracy not less. In the same way, we need more urban freedom, not less, if we are going to dissipate the fury of inequality. All the indicators are that the official response is exactly the opposite, with rioters being made homeless, call for more street security and the inevitable roll out of yet more CCTV. But this will only tighten the knot around an already squeezed sector of society, potentially exacerbating the next response. The choice of operations on the broken middle is to either further fracture it by erecting spatial barriers between its constituent parts, or else to accept the patchwork for what it is (a healthy and honest spatial mix) and reinvest it with more, not less, genuinely public space. Clearly the political solution to the reduction of social inequality is out of the direct hands of urbanists, but we do have the opportunity, and I would argue responsibility, to be brave in resisting the calls for ever firmer lines of demarcation and ever more tools of urban control.

References

Bauman, Z. (2011). *Interview – Zygmunt Bauman on the UK riots*. <http://www.social-europe.eu/2011/08/interview-zygmunt-bauman-on-the-uk-riots> Accessed 07.10.11.
CASA (2011). *MapTube Map*. <http://maptube.org/map.aspx?m=ol&s=bBHFGlAlRcsKCSaXwRjAplwcCnYMClA9&k=http://orca.casa.ucl.ac.uk/~ollie/misc/londonriots_verified_20110809_1514.kml> Accessed 03.10.11.
Davis, M. (1990). *City of quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*. London: Verso.
Guardian (2011). *England riots: Where they happened and where suspects lived*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/aug/15/riots-map-happened-suspects-addresses> Accessed 03.10.11.
Jacob, S. (2011). *Everywhere is a target, everywhere is symbolic*. Domus. <http://www.domusweb.it/en/op-ed/everywhere-is-a-target-everywhere-is-symbolic> Accessed 03.10.11.
Minton, A. (2009). *Ground control: Fear and happiness in the twenty-first-century city*. London: Penguin.
Simmel, G. (1997). The metropolis and mental life. In D. Frisby & M. Featherstone (Eds.), *Simmel on culture: Selected writings*. London: Sage.
Space Syntax Network (2011). London riots location analysis – First findings. <http://spacesyntaxnetwork.wordpress.com/2011/09/15/london-riots-location-analysis-%E2%80%93-first-findings> Accessed 03.10.11.
Wates, N., & Knevitt, C. (1987). *Community architecture: How people are creating their own environment*. London: Penguin.