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Inequality constitutes a particular place

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Riot draws the landscape around it into unique focus.¹ In the USA, as I write in October 2011, hundreds of tent cities are being erected, in protest more than modern day Hoovervilles. Across Europe, there is anger and turmoil. In a few places there is rioting, including places that had thought themselves largely immune. In Britain, many people have recently asked why a large number, but tiny proportion, of mostly young people rioted in August 2011. Many have also questioned the part that rising inequalities could have played in making a number of people poorer and for some to become angry.

By 2015, government cuts in Britain are predicted by the IMF to bring the UK level of public spending (as a share of GDP) below even the paltry proportion spent by the USA. Given current spending plans for austerity, of anywhere in Western Europe (including Greece) it will be the UK which will spend the lowest share of its wealth on public goods. Is it any wonder that more extreme Republicans and affiliates of the Tea Party

have been visiting England to, as they call it, 'learn lessons'? However, now, when they come, they should be careful exactly where they stay in London. It is no longer that safe a city.

Young adults in both Britain and the USA today have only ever known a country in which income and wealth have been redistributed from poor to rich—to the detriment of all. How much money could be saved by doing the reverse and redistributing from rich to poor? The answer is an enormous amount, but more in the USA than anywhere else. Within the last 12 months the record of the USA on curtailing the growth of inequalities has been poor, but far better than that of the UK. Given all this it is worth asking how much reparation is required in the long run for a sense eventually to emerge that we are all in this together. It may help to see how events are viewed from outside of a country, so we start with reports from a Chinese daily newspaper and end with a study published in the *Washington Post*.²

Riots: the language of the unheard?

For a few days in August 2011, London and anarchy was the talk of the world. The Chinese Government even congratulated the government in London for considering turning off the power to mobile phone towers and thinking of censoring the Internet. On the riots themselves, writing in the *China Daily Post*, Londoner Murad Qureshi reiterated a common response:

Western youths do not suffer absolute poverty. Nevertheless, they feel the pangs of relative poverty in a city where some parts, like central London, have become a playground for the super-rich and where they feel excluded from the game of consumerism. The scale of inequality in our society is undoubtedly an underlying factor. But it is tragic that young people seem to believe that the only way to fix this imbalance is to have all the latest electronic gadgets, which they looted from the shops and establishments they destroyed or damaged (Chair of the London Assembly Environment Committee 2011).

Murad Qureshi was writing in a debate the paper had set up with Binod Singh, an Indian lecturer working at Beijing's Foreign Studies University. In reply to Qureshi's comments on underlying factors, Singh quoted what he thought were Martin Luther King's words. From outside of Britain, what was happening looked both extreme and familiar. This is what Singh reported Martin Luther King to have said 44 years ago:

When you cut facilities, slash jobs, abuse power, discriminate, drive people into deeper poverty and shoot people dead whilst refusing to provide answers or justice, the people will rise up and express their

anger and frustration if you refuse to hear their cries. A riot is the language of the unheard.

Martin Luther King could have said this, but it is hard to find any evidence that he did. What we know he *did* say is: 'A riot is, at bottom, the language of the unheard.'³ Quite how his words were edited and added to we may never know, but Binod's version now circulates widely on the Chinese whispers of web. I like Binod's version.

The reason I like Binod's version is that very recently two economists have proved that quickly cutting public spending causes riots. They used data from almost all of the last century and found that the nature of the austerity is key: 'expenditure cuts wreak havoc, tax increases do so only to a small extent and insignificantly. Overall, the budget balance matters for predicting unrest' (Ponticelli and Voth 2011).

In Britain in August 2011, five people died in the riots. The riots in Los Angeles in August 1965 claimed at least 28 lives.⁴ And it was amidst the aftermath of that Los Angeles bloodshed that Martin Luther King wrote about the language of the unheard. In this short editorial there is no space to explore the geographical inflections of rioting and inequality in depth, but it is also sometimes good to report on immediate reaction as much as give a more considered response.

No doubt King's detractors during the 1960s when he was writing claimed that poorer Americans had never had it as good and there was no excuse for their criminality. In contrast to being poor and/or black in the 1930s, this was certainly true. I was struck by how many British people told me this summer that London's rioters should be sent to Sierra Leone or Sudan to experience *real* deprivation. But, in reality, few people compare their lives with their parents'

standards of living or with the living standards of people in another country. When they complain about inequality and injustice, or just about being bored and not having stuff, they, we, compare ourselves with those around us.

Riots: the work of gangs?

In many ways, the Internet resembles a graffiti-covered wall, replete with people writing on it complaining about graffiti. One of the pieces of graffiti plastered across the blogosphere in August claimed that the riots were the work of gangs. Members of the upper classes, whose predominant experience of gangs is their membership of university dining clubs (and later exclusive gyms), were especially vocal.

David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, had famously been a member of an aristocratic dining club in his early twenties, a club which revelled in disorder and violence, but which did not give him much experience of normal street violence. In response to David Cameron's views on gang culture, a series of better-informed people began to explain why it was not in the interests of gangs to start riots.

Elijah Kerr was reported by the news organisation Reuters as being a former London gang member who did not trust the government, police or press, but who nevertheless decided on 15 August to speak out because the claims were simply getting silly. He explained:

They [the government] is trying to say gangs ... organised the whole riot a week before to loot a Curry's [electrical store]. It's so stupid and ridiculous ... It's just rubbish.

All those involved, they are little kids on bikes. KIDS. Look at who has been charged ... they're not gangsters. Youths who have nothing, who have

been swept up in trying to fight back against their circumstances and the police 'cos there's just nowt for them.⁵

Or a growing divide?

A few days earlier, a columnist for the London-based newspaper, *The Guardian*, argued that it was impossible to divorce the troubles from the growing social divide in Britain, and the feeling that some people were being left behind. She concluded:

Polarisation between rich and poor areas, as much as between rich and poor people, has been increasing since the '70s, in large part because regeneration projects have not been able to make good the simple fact that wages and employment prospects at the bottom have collapsed, while those at the top have gone through the roof (Hanley 2011).

She was not alone in her views. While leading politicians fled back from their luxury resorts, facial tans gleaming, youth workers on the ground in London were explaining to reporters what they thought was happening. Bloggers began constructing the basis of a narrative that is likely to become more firmly cemented as time passes:

...as one youth worker explained to a reporter, 'Youths are frustrated, they want all the nice clothes. They ain't got no money, they don't have jobs...' Couple this with the growing police harassment, the shutting down of social services, rising rents and gentrification and an ideologically bankrupt—in many cases just plain bankrupt—economic system that rewards only the most avaricious, competitive individualism and nobody should still be surprised that a generation born of futility and resentment, wholly unheard and bereft of any sense of consequence or accountability, has

seized upon an opportunity to reclaim some small and fleeting handful of power (Eloff 2011).

If it were only the extent of inequality that fuels riots, there would have been fewer riots in Britain in the early 1980s. Back then, when, measured both by income and wealth, we had almost never been as equal. However, in the early 1980s (as is again the case now), Britain was becoming more unequal and there was not much hope of that trend reversing. So it is not the *extent* of inequalities, but the *direction* they are taking, which correlates with riot.

But how much awareness of inequality do people explicitly have and how much seeps through implicitly into a collective, largely unconscious, well of despair?

There is evidence of a growing fear of falling to the bottom. Near the bottom are people appealing benefit decisions. Citizens Advice Bureaux report that in the north east of England, the benefit appeal process invariably takes over 6 months, sometimes 12 months or longer. Cuts to legal aid are likely to make a bad situation worse. Young adults can see how their parents are treated and do not look at that kind of future with envy.

An adult [in England] appealing an incapacity benefit decision suggesting she/he is fit for work is entitled to a reduced rate of income support amounting to £52.36 a week. She/he is likely to spend, on average, £10 on gas and £10 on electricity, leaving her/him with £32.36 a week. Water charges are at least £6 a week and many people have to make up a shortfall in rent, uncovered by housing benefit, of at least £5 a week. This leaves £21.36. A basic TV licence is £3.50 a week, which leaves £16.36, i.e. £2.33 a day for everything else, including food and drink, clothes and travel expenses.⁶

Put more succinctly from a part of Britain (Cambridge) that is often seen as affluent, a debt adviser writes:

It makes me so angry that the gutsiness and sheer hard graft of the people I see is buried under garbage about benefit scroungers: so many people with disabilities and/or caring for small children and/or living on pension credit, people who care for people with disabilities... And that on incomes that don't cover the rent, maybe in villages where services are increasingly non-existent.⁷

Fewer young people can now look forward to a decent life, especially in London. For the large majority, getting rich quick or even moving into the best-off fifth of society is an increasingly unlikely option. As income inequalities rise, the gaps between us grow, and the chances of moving between groups diminish just as the significance of such moves rises.

In Britain, it appears foolish to suggest that the current trend of rapidly rising inequality is unrelated to disorder. If the wealth of the rich had been cut it is unlikely they would have taken to the streets, as I show in the tables, there are simply not enough rich people. But how bad is inequality in the UK and what would it take to get back to those days before the early 1980s riots when the country was a more equitable and peaceful place? Let us start with what has happened most recently and then work back a generation.

A divided nation

In October 2010, the UK Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) produced a series of estimates demonstrating that the comprehensive spending review announced that month would hit families in the poorest 20 per cent of the income bracket the most.

An incensed government turned on the IFS. British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said, 'the IFS was wrong to claim that the

biggest losers from the £81 billion public service cuts were the poorest families' and suggested that a fuller analysis would reach a different conclusion. By this he meant an analysis that suggested that the middle and upper classes would come to rely less on state support, but he could not produce any numbers to back his claim.

Andrea Leadsom, a former Barclays banker and now UK Conservative MP, said that the IFS figures 'might misrepresent the number of poorer households affected by tax and benefit changes'. But, just like Nick Clegg, she provided no evidence for her assertion. This was the routine response of government in 2010 and 2011 to criticism: try to rubbish opponents with the statistical equivalent of innuendo.

Mike Brewer, then head of direct tax and welfare at the IFS, responded by pointing out that what was being criticised in the IFS analysis was the reliability or assumptions made within the government's own surveys, conducted on its behalf by the Office for National Statistics and directly in the case of those of the Department for Work and Pensions. The *Guardian* reported:

Brewer conceded that a minority of households within the lower deciles of its analysis, when interviewed about their responses to surveys, produced answers that could skew the analysis. But he emphasised the small number of people involved were unlikely to alter the outcome (Inman 2010).

What he might have added is that there are likely to be more problems inherent in estimating hidden income for tax avoidance reasons at the top of the income distribution than at the bottom and, if anything, the estimates might be more biased in underestimating how well the very affluent have avoided being hurt in the downturn.

In 2010, the London newspaper, *The Sunday Times*, reported that the wealth of the thousand richest people in Britain had risen by 29.9 per cent in 1 year, with each holding, on average, £335.5 million. In 2011, it reported that it had risen by a further 25 per cent. Beneath these 'very richest', the 'extremely rich' did almost as well, the 'very rich' not quite as well and so on down to the 'average', who experienced a real fall in living standards for the first time in decades. It is likely that figures will soon show that those below the 'average' experienced a real increase in absolute poverty.⁸

So if, as the IFS says, the cuts have hurt those at the bottom most and those at the top have seen their wealth soar and bonuses restored, just how bad has inequality become?

Just how unequal are we?

Almost 3 years before defending the IFS against Liberal and Conservative attack, Mike Brewer and two colleagues produced a report on the extent of income inequalities in the UK. It was titled *High Income Individuals: racing away?* and was press released in January 2008 (Brewer et al. 2008). Because of what has happened since, we now know that this represents a conservative analysis of the current state of income inequalities.

Table 1 is taken from data provided by that 2008 IFS report, reproduced because its figures can be used to compare inequality in 2008 with the situation in 1970. Data are also incorporated from the recently released World Top Incomes Survey and the table presents just how well paid people at the top are compared with those near the top, those near them and the rest. These groups are defined as follows. The richest are the best off one-thousandth of the population. The next row of the table is the

Table 1 UK annual income, before tax, all tax payers, 1970–2005⁹

	Number of people	Average income in 2005	Change in 1970–2005 (%)	Share in 2005 (%)	Average income in 1970	Share in 1970 (%)
Top 0.1%	47,000	£780,043	694	5.0	£98,193	1.2
Top 0.1–1.0%	420,000	£155,832	181	9.0	£55,535	5.9
Top 10–1.0%	4.2 million	£49,960	143	28.8	£20,525	21.8
Bottom 90%	24.8 million	£16,837	48	57.2	£11,400	71.2

remainder of the best off one-hundredth of the population (people in the top 1 per cent but not in the top 0.1 per cent). The next row is the remainder of the best off one-tenth, and then the final row is the 90 per cent of us all remaining. Each row contains ten times more people than the row above it.

Non-taxpayers and wealth not subject to income tax are not included in the table. If it were, the picture would be far more inequitable. Similarly, if these figures were worked out for households rather than individuals, the inequalities would grow (but, equalised for household structure, they would shrink a little too). Even so, these figures are bad enough.

Table 1 indicates that most earning adults in the UK—almost 25 million taxpayers—have an income of just under £17,000 a year (£16,837). This has risen by 48 per cent in real terms since 1970. Two people today can buy what three could afford during their parents' time. The next column shows that this 90 per cent of the population have recourse to 57.2 per cent of all income, a much smaller share than the 71.2 per cent their parents held but, in absolute terms, much more money.

Above the bottom 90 per cent of the population, the next 9 per cent (the top 10 per cent less the top single percentile) have an average income of almost exactly £50,000 a year. They are doing well. They are 143 per cent better off compared with their equivalents 35 years ago, who received just £20,525 each a year. Two of these people can now buy what

five in the same group could buy a generation ago. Compared with those below them, they have been raking it in.

But above most of the best off tenth are the best off 1 per cent, who have done even better. Even excluding the very richest one-thousandth of the population, the best off one in one hundred people are now each, on average, more than three times richer than the remainder of the best off tenth of tax-paying adults in Britain. Their average incomes exceed £155,000 a year. They now take home 9 per cent of all income, even though they are only 0.9 per cent of the population. Assuming they come from the same strata of society, a couple now has the combined spending power of their four parents and of another couple as well; all this as compared to as recently as a single generation ago. These are the people in the prime ministerial pay bracket.

But, of course, the British Prime Minister does not operate in the circles of people in his pay bracket. Will Hutton was sponsored by the UK Government to produce a supposedly independent report on income inequalities during 2010 and 2011. His interim report revealed that the Prime Minister's real take-home pay, including such perks as country retreats, exceeds half a million pounds:

Radio 4's *More or Less* calculated that the PM's total package could be worth £581,651, including an estimate of the annual cash value of the pension

(£45,651), a nominal rental value of accommodation at Downing Street and Chequers of £338,000.¹⁰

The Prime Minister moves in the circles of the best off one-thousandth of the UK population. In 1970, the average income of this group in today's money was just below £100,000. Today, it exceeds £780,000. A couple in the best off one-thousandth today has the income of eight such couples a generation ago. That is enough to leave the remainder of the best-off percentile feeling very sore indeed, especially when they are told they receive too much. Like everyone else, they receive too much compared with those below them and too little compared with those above them.

Redistribute

Pay is relative—just like poverty. What matters is what everyone else is paid. That is what determines where you can live, where your children can go to school, whether you can have what is considered to be a decent holiday, and pay the TV licence and be part of society or not pay it and be a criminal. The current pay bill of the UK, based on simply multiplying the figures above, is £730 billion a year.

£730 billion is calculated simply by multiplying 47,000 by £780,043 and adding to that total the product (multiplication) of 420,000 by £155,832; 4.2 million times £49,960 and 24.8 million times £16,837. It is a remarkably simple calculation to carry out. All the figures are simply taken from the table. One reason why such high income-inequalities might be tolerated in the UK and the USA is that multiplying four pairs of relatively large numbers together and adding up the results is seen in these countries as a particular skill.

If we were to return to the pay differentials of 1970, but to *increase* the incomes of the bottom

90 per cent of the population by 1 per cent, the total pay bill would be only £537 billion a year. It is easy enough to work this out from the figures above. The overall pay bill could be reduced by one-quarter and—at the same time—90 per cent of people in Britain could be better off. It is interesting to hear the wealthy try to explain how this is not affordable.

As pay differential increases, the way people treat each other changes. For example, students who receive a tiny fraction of lectures' incomes, often now in the form of loans, can be seen as less deserving to be heard. In fact how do you legitimise hearing them when they are work so little in comparison with the great orator who beings: 'This morning's lecture is on...' (Delph-Janiurek 2000).

If you think what has happened in Britain is stunning, take a look at what is going on elsewhere. In Canada, it is now become accepted within cities such as Toronto that whereas recently 80 per cent of people were doing ok and a tenth were either rich or poor, today 40 per cent are struggling beneath those former poverty rates, only a fifth remain in the middle, and the rest are strung out above the middle but having to constantly compete to appear talented in a race based on lies (Wilson and Keil 2008). Both the UK and Canada have been replicating trends that began a little earlier in the USA.

Table 2 for the USA is reproduced exactly as Table 1. All I have done to create this final table is to merge a couple of cells of data from a more complex original that was published in the *Washington Post* on 18 June 2011.¹¹

Britain's wealthiest one-thousandth still have a long way to go to match their counterparts in the USA, but they are currently converging with them. Even more remarkable is the fact that, in real terms, the bottom 90 per cent of adults in the USA are slightly worse off today than they were in 1970.

Table 2 USA annual income, before tax, all tax payers, 1970–2008

	Number of people	Average income in 2008	Change 1970–2008 (%)	Share in 2008 (%)	Average income in 1970	Share in 1970 (%)
Top 0.1%	152,000	\$5.6 million	385	10.3	\$1.15 million	2.7
Top 0.1–1.0%	1.4 million	\$636,522	118	10.6	\$291,527	6.2
Top 10–1.0%	13.6 million	\$164,372	49	27.1	\$110,181	23.4
Bottom 90%	137.2 million	\$31,244	–1	52.0	\$31,560	67.6

Give everyone in the bottom 90 per cent in the USA back that 1 per cent and reduce the inequalities between the remaining 10 per cent to what they were in 1970, and you then reduce the overall pay bill of the USA from \$8,247 billion, to \$6,404 billion. Funnily enough, the Tea Party has not yet worked out how easily the USA could start to live within its means by this mechanism.

Finally, a word needs to be said on wealth—the amalgamation of excess income. Within the USA, today wealth inequalities have recently risen rapidly when comparing households designated to be of white ethnicity and those who are labelled black or Hispanic. This increase in inequality in wealth began before the economic crash of 2008, but was greatly exacerbated by it. By 2009 the mean average black family had recourse to 19 times less wealth than the mean average white family.

By 2009, when all the wealth of black households in the USA had been averaged out, there was just \$5,677 to share among every household. Just 4 years earlier that figure had been \$12,124. The housing market crash hurt black families especially hard. However, Hispanics were similarly affected, their mean average wealth falling from \$18,359 per household in 2005 to just \$6,325 by 2009. These are huge drops for millions of people from already relatively low levels of average wealth over very short time periods. All the

sources for these claims are provided by Kochhar, Fry and Taylor (2011).

In contrast to other ethnic groups in the USA, the average white family saw its mean household wealth fall from \$134,992 in 2005 to \$113,149 by 2009. Most white families are not that wealthy, the mean average is dragged upwards by a very wealthy minority, but the median white family is still much richer than the median black or Hispanic family. Having low wealth in the richest country on earth is particularly demeaning. Inequalities in wealth by ethnic group in the UK are not yet measured as carefully as in the USA.

Conclusion

Just as rioters do not consider possible prison sentences as they riot, not a single rioter will have been seething with anger over that 694 per cent increase in the income of the richest in Britain over the course of a generation as they put a single brick through a single window, but prison sentences and rising income and wealth inequalities still influence riots. The people imprisoned will be more careful to cover their faces next time. And, until inequalities begin to fall, there will always be a next time.¹²

The recent riots in England have drawn the social landscape around them into unique focus. At first there was condemnation, then recrimination, now contemplation. Next there



Figure 1 Bruegel, Pieter the Elder (1528–1569): *The Harvesters*, 1565. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Oil on wood, Overall, including added strips at top, bottom, and right, 46 7/8 × 63 3/4 in. (119 × 162 cm); original painted surface 45 7/8 × 62 7/8 in. (116.5 × 159.5 cm). Inscribed: Signed and dated (lower right): BRVEGEL / [MD]LXV [now largely illegible]. Rogers Fund, 1919. Acc. n.: 19.164. © 2011. Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

may be concern, fear and contestation. Places are constituted not only by the social landscape found there, but also by what then ensues due to that landscape. These were not just *any* riots, they were the riots that constitute what it meant to be London in August 2011.

Notes

- 1 Rising from the spot where people are gathered for their repast is an old gnarled pear-tree, which provides them with shade from the sun, a back-rest and a prop for utensils. Being the month of August, the tree is in full leaf, and fruit is ripening on the branches. But it is not just *any* tree. For one thing it draws the landscape around it into a unique focus: in other words, by its presence it constitutes a particular place (Ingold 2000, p. 204, Emphasis as in original).

On the tree in the painting *The Harvesters* by Pieter Bruegel the elder (Figure 1). I am very grateful to

Stephen Farrall, of the School of Law, Sheffield University, for pointing out his work to me, in relation to riot, but in this case as Sheffield city centre being constituted by its absence of shops!

- 2 This commentary is based on an article written for 'Poverty' the magazine of the UK Child Poverty Action Group (titled 'Riots, redistribution and reparation'). It also draws on work on why there were no riots in August 2011 in my home city of Sheffield, England, Lee and Dorling (2011). Stephen Farrall's original observation was that Sheffield city centre was constituted by what was not there: the shopping mall of Meadowhall being out of town, which made looting in the city I live in less attractive.
- 3 *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Chapter 4, attributing this to 1967.
- 4 http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/15/newsid_3750000/3750939.stm
- 5 The Reuters reporter was Stefano Ambrogi. Whether the northern word 'nowt' really was used in Brixton we may never know. The report is at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/12/us-britain-riots-gangs-idUSTRE77B47I20110812>

- 6 These figures are taken from a report by Gateshead CAB, which concluded: 'The impact on someone with significant mental health problems is obvious and can only be a barrier to recovery and maintenance of good physical and mental health' (Mark Gamsu Visiting Professor, Leeds Metropolitan University).
- 7 An email sent to the author from an adviser at Cambridge Citizens Advice Bureau.
- 8 Figures on the very affluent are released a few months after they increase their wealth by surveys conducted on behalf of newspapers. Figures on poverty tend to lag about 2 years behind events as there are so many more poor people to count than the handful of multi-millionaires in any rich list.
- 9 All the values are in 2005 pounds adjusted for inflation.
- 10 Hutton Review of Fair Pay in the public sector, interim report, http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/hutton_interim_report.pdf
- 11 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/business/income-inequality/>
- 12 If you want to see where falling income inequalities could eventually get Britain, look to the recent discussion of a minimum income standard in the House of Commons. An amendment to the Welfare Reform Bill was proposed by Kate Green (formally of CPAG): 'such regulations will make reference to an independently determined minimum income standard', 31 March, cols 262–279, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmpublic/welfare/110331/am/110331s01.htm>

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