FCJ–161 Productive Provocations: Vitriolic Media, Spaces of Protest and Agonistic Outrage in the 2011 England Riots.

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Abstract:

The intense social upheaval that spread through a number of UK cities in the riots and protests of August, 2011 signalled the terrifying speed with which passionate disaffection can turn to uncontained violence. At stake in the dense and volatile debate that ensued, and in the acts of violence themselves, were contests over spaces as well as competing models of democracy, publics and citizenship, including the appropriate use of social media. Within these debates, almost universally, rational deliberative discourse and action is assumed to be the only route to legitimate "civil" society. So what is to be made of the violent physical contest over city squares, streets and property, as well as contests over acts of participation and demonstration played out online through the hundreds of eyewitness videos posted to sites like YouTube and the endless flow of often vitriolic words in blogs, comments spaces and social network sites? This paper uses a video posted to YouTube titled 'Clapham Junction Speaker (London Riots 2011)' to examine the passion and provocation that flowed beyond the city streets to enliven, intensify and sustain forms of protest and civic engagement. We argue that the aggressive and antagonistic tenor of the Speaker's twenty minute monologue, the bitter vitriol that flowed through the comments space, and even the act of posting it constitute significant elements of a generative, 'agonistic' public, to use Chantal Mouffe's term, that operates in multiple spaces and outside of the rationalising discourse demanded by mainstream media and government. This paper develops a richer understanding of these spaces of protest, and the concept of provocation central to these events.

To act, then, is neither arriving at a scene nor fleeing from it, but actually engaging in its creation. (Isin, 2008: 27)

Introduction

The intense social upheaval that spread through a number of UK cities in what became known variously as the 'London riots', 'England's summer of disorder', or more generally the '2011 England riots', signalled the terrifying speed with which passionate disaffection can turn to uncontained violence. In the aftermath, much investment was made in searches for causes, as governments, scholars and the general public wondered how normally peaceful city streets across the country could come to resemble a war zone. Much of the commentary in the mainstream media reflected traditional ideological debates between the left and right of the political spectrum. Conservative politicians blaming the events on the actions of a 'criminal underclass', whilst social and political commentators on the left drew parallels between these and previous incidents of rioting in London in the 1980s, where government cuts, poverty, youth unemployment and racial discrimination—particularly related to police treatment of Afro-Caribbean youth—characterised the unrest (Scarman, 1981). Racial discrimination was also identified as a major trigger for the 2011 riots, with the police shooting death of Mark Duggan being perceived as the main catalyst early on (Newburn et al, 2011; Morrel et al, 2011; Hope, 2012; Waddington, 2012; Lea and Hallsworth, 2012). Economic inequality and disadvantage were also identified as factors that contributed to youth disaffection in areas where rioting and looting took place, with welfare cuts and acute perceptions of inequality related to 'Global Financial Crisis' austerity measures identified as factors that fuelled youth anger and feelings of hopelessness in certain locations (Newburn et al, 2011; Lea and Hollsworth, 2012).

And yet, despite these perspectives providing the primary categories of explanation for the riots, a number of commentators and researchers also pointed to new experiences of collective organisation, action, emotion and consciousness related to technological developments in social media that served to differentiate these riots from previous forms of civil disturbance. Criticism of the negative uses of mobile and social media flared and took hold. In particular, many commentators argued that the use of social networking services and new media technologies (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, and Blackberry Messenger [BBM] services) played a 'substantive role in the riots' by speeding up the flow of communications across multiple spaces, allowing events to be broadcast and shared between members of the public, eyewitnesses and those participating in the unrest in real time (Newburn et al, 2011). However, while these developments could, alternatively, have been considered in terms of the plurality and dynamism of new public spaces of protest and civic engagement, the overwhelming focus of discussions has been to connect these technologies causally

with what happened on the street, thus reducing social media to the status of an instrument that 'incites and organises' crowds to participate in acts of 'public disorder'. For example, in *Reading the Riot: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder* (2011) Tim Newburn and colleagues provided evidence that BBM, primarily, but also Facebook and Twitter, were used to incite and summon crowds to particular locations for the purposes of engaging in public acts of disorder (Newburn et al, 2011: 31–32). This understanding was also echoed by Prime Minister David Cameron, who called for the closure of the Blackberry Messenger network in order to stop the violence and looting (Newburn et al, 2011).

Reactions such as those of David Cameron signal the immediate and accepted conflation of violence and criminality in the streets with aberrant 'misuse' of technologies of communication, mobile networks and social media, with the aim of imposing greater restrictions on their use. Smartphone technologies and social networking sites did appear to play a key role in the organisation and spread of the riots, but looking for a causal link to public disorder diminishes the complex forms of sociality, emotion, protest and civic engagement at play. Provocation and incitement are important features of all media during times of public unrest and riot. We argue in this paper that beyond the superficial sense of incitement and escalation of public disorder, mobile devices and social media platforms also enable generative forms of public expression, collaboration, contest and conflict in the form of interjections or provocations, particularly in their capacity for affecting visual and audible access to events and in providing a space for productive—even if often antagonistic and vitriolic—exchange.

In this paper we explore the contest of publics, race and citizenship that unfolded during the 2011 England riots through a detailed analysis of two videos posted to YouTube, the transformations of the spaces of protest they enabled, and the agonistic interactions they provoked. The videos—titled 'Clapham Junction Speaker (London Riots 2011) 1 of 2', and 'Clapham Junction Speaker (London Riots 2011) 2 of 2'—were recorded and uploaded by YouTube personality and activist Charlie Veitch. They capture a 20 minute monologue delivered by a local Clapham Junction man of West Indian decent named Neville, during one of the clean-up events organised through Twitter and Facebook. Neville's speech act, whilst at times angry and confrontational, articulates and embodies local disaffection and tension and provokes extensive, if often vitriolic, exchange in the comments fields, both during and well after the riot event. It is this 'extended' space of online reaction and conflict that points towards the generative potential within these events.

Further, we argue that what is at stake in the dense and volatile debates erupting online, and in the acts associated with the recorded events, are competing models of democracy, publics and citizenship, and contested modes and spaces of protest. Videos

such as these, publically available and circulating through social media, form the basis for emergent 'spaces of protest', to use Judith Butler's (2011) phrase, that might seem to extend some of the aggressive, antagonistic behaviour characteristic of the violent rioting, and yet which ultimately transforms that aggression and antagonism to more productive ends. Rather than conforming to accepted 'civil' processes of 'deliberative democracy' the contested and provocative nature of these interactions point to modes of democratic participation and citizenship that align with Chantal Mouffe's account of 'agonistic pluralism' (2000; 2005). Mouffe's notion of agonism is helpful here because it points to the potential behind the kinds of adversarial and vitriolic contest that can follow from open modes of civic engagement. In Mouffe's model, the institutions of democracy should aim to allow 'collective passions…to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary' (Mouffe, 2005: 103). Agonistic contest occurs when conflicting parties acknowledge that they are adversaries but nonetheless 'operate on common symbolic ground' (Papacharissi, 2010: 161). Unlike models of deliberative democracy, in Mouffe's account of agonistic pluralism 'the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs' (Mouffe, 2005; 103). Passions and affects, she argues, play a crucial role in securing allegiance to democratic values (Mouffe, 2005: 95). Mouffe's broader proposition is that: 'far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence' (Mouffe, 2005: 103).That is, the antagonistic tenor of the Speaker's twenty minute monologue, the bitter vitriol that flowed through YouTube's comments space, and even the act of recording and uploading the videos, constitute significant elements of a generative, agonistic public that operates in multiple spaces and outside of the rationalising discourse demanded by mainstream media and government.

The epigraph to this paper points to the need to theorise these acts, or, in this case, a range of acts of provocation, as central to the creation of the scene of citizenship. We engage theoretical approaches to acts of civic engagement, spaces of protest, publics and counter publics to conceive the passion and conflict arising in the streets, alongside the use of social media tools, and to illustrate the productive role of provocation in shaping an emerging form of agonistic pluralism. The following section introduces the intervention into the scene of protest offered by Neville's provocative speech act in the 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos. Section three elaborates on the place of passion, cruelty and conflict in the city, drawing on the work of Nigel Thrift, Bülent Dicken and Michael Warner, and considers the reorientations brought about by uses of digital and networked media. In the final section we engage with the relation between acts of provocation and the field of social media contest. We highlight the importance of the act of videoing and uploading the speech, and YouTube's comments field in enabling agonistic forms of engagement, with the conflict outside of the normative ideals and established institutions of 'deliberative democracy'.

Disrupting the Visual–Discursive Scene

Reflecting on the protests against the Mubarek regime in Egypt's Tahrir Square in January and February 2011, Judith Butler joined other scholars to describe technologies of mediation, particularly as they are transformed by digital, mobile and social media devices, as an integral part of the scenes of protest as they unfolded. More than this, Butler argued that 'the media is the scene or the space in its extended and replicable visual and audible dimensions' (Butler, 2011). Events like the England riots and those in the Middle East, while still dependent on embodied interactions on the street, become 'extended' visual and audible scenes of protest, moving beyond the local spatial and temporal context, and opening up multiple mediated spaces across which 'the scene' travels to become 'both there and here' (Butler, 2011). Participatory forms of citizenship enabled through strategic acts of filming, recording and uploading scenes of protest to social networks, as well as public engagement with this content in online social environments, can likewise be understood as political acts in themselves, opening up new vistas of public communication between bodies on the street and online actors. This might be aligned with those forms of media practice defined as 'activist' or 'tactical' where new media provide 'powerful tools for challenging the givens of mainstream or popular culture' (Lievrouw, 2011: 1). But where tactical media use a range of techniques to disrupt and challenge mainstream narratives (Guertin, 2012), the 'rogue', amateur or witness media of the streets uploaded as hours of video footage, photographs, comments and blog posts are often in the first instance incidental, even accidental, but no less passionate and incendiary.

Certainly this was evident in the England riots with thousands of amateur images and videos circulating on YouTube, and through other social media networks, setting the tone for public discourse by showing live and uncut scenes of burning streets and buildings, milling and running crowds and violent confrontations between often masked protagonists and heavily armoured police. In one specific example, as reported by The London Evening Standard (8 August 2011) a video showing shaky camera footage of police allegedly surrounding and brutalising a young girl lying on the road while a woman screams at police spread quickly through the Tottenham community and more broadly through online networks, acting as a significant provocation to the violent confrontation with police that ensued and which is widely regarded as the trigger to the riots, though the validity of the video was later contested (The Guardian, 7 December 2011).

This interaction points to the significance of YouTube both as a site that broadcasts events from multiple viewpoints but also as a social network enabling new forms of interaction with the scene of protest. Superficially, pejorative notions of incitation could be attributed to the uses of social media in this and other instances, but many thousands of hours of

amateur video uploaded to sites like YouTube also provide rich and detailed access to the scenes of riot, while extending the visible scene far beyond that made available through broadcast television coverage. As Baker argues, these practices allow new forms of public protest and community to emerge that 'traverse and intersect geographical public space and the virtual public sphere' extending the speed and scope of civil unrest (Baker, 2011). Of course, this is not to say that public broadcast and commercial news coverage of the riots was sidelined by social media representations. On the contrary, as described by Butler (2011) and later affirmed in the 'Reading the Riots' report (Newburn et al, 2011: 33), mainstream media remains an important part of the contemporary media environment which also exercises its own kind of incitement for commercial reasons. As one informant put it:

> They had maps on the news showing where it had spread to… I think they had it red round where it was going off bad and I think Birmingham, London, I think Manchester… And I was like 'Birmingham?' and I went straight on the train. (22 year old man who clashed with police in Birmingham, Reading the Riots, 2011: 33)

It is important to note that these modes of incitement are still bound by structural inequalities embedded in the mainstream public and commercial news media, which preserve the status quo by representing the street protesters as 'deviant' and the events as forms of social 'disorder'. Adding to, and affecting this ecology, the limited and limiting frames of traditional news outlets have become starkly contrasted with alternative mediated and networked spaces for protest, activism and expression (in this instance based around YouTube). We aim to show how these new media modes and practices offer an alternative infrastructure for a radical pluralism to form around many of those who experience the social conditions at the heart of the disaffection and disorder. This is conveyed through signature visual content which, by the nature of being filmed on location, often in fluid and volatile social environments, conveys a visceral sense of danger and violence that implicates the body as a body at risk or in some way 'on the line', for instance, in the body holding the phone or camera 'face to face with those they oppose, unprotected, injurable, injured, persistent' (Butler, 2011). Where the business of mainstream news is to report the dramatic image of violence as event, on video-sharing sites such as YouTube the image of violence itself becomes the context through which passion is constituted and intensified. That is, beyond the spectacle, video and social media sites can act differently to establish outlets for the expression of disaffection and forms of civic engagement even where they are no less aggressive, antagonistic and incendiary as scenes of burning buildings, looting and violence. The two 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos carry a simmering aggression in far greater duration than mainstream media sites permit, in a way that extends the scene of protest and establishes alternative spaces for civic engagement (often in the form of vitriolic exchange). The subject of the video,

Neville's speech act, its upload and the dynamic exchange within the comment space highlight the plurality of opinion and forms of protest, citizenship and identity normally excluded from the rational 'public sphere'.

The two videos were uploaded to YouTube on 10 August 2011, the day after what reporters described as hundreds of youths looting businesses in the Clapham Junction station area of Battersea, overwhelming police for several hours (The Daily Telegraph, August 2011). They depict a man of West Indian background who reacts angrily to predominantly white members of the crowd who have come to clean up 'his' neighbourhood. He swears and uses sexually explicit language, shouting that white people claim to be 'with the black people of this country' but that they 'smile with you and then fuck you up the arse'. In response to this a white police officer, one of about seven represented in the clip who hold the public behind police barricades whilst a scattering of public officials (including the Lord Mayor) and police occupy the central public space, confronts the man over the tone of his language and his use of other provocative gestures. Neville continues to deliver an unbroken and passionate monologue about the issues that led to the riot, including police discrimination and harassment toward black youth, welfare cuts and a growing gap between rich and poor.

The tenor of Neville's speech is angry, adversarial and provocative, but it also alternates between different forms of communication with the crowd as he answers questions and shares moments of reciprocity, whilst at other times he aggressively talks over the top of anyone who contests him. The response to Neville by police and public is interesting. As the video progresses, a small crowd starts turning away from the recognisable political figure of the visiting Lord Mayor to face Neville. They respond to Neville's speech by clapping, contesting and recording it on their phones, supporting the idea that new media technologies can create new platforms for speakers who are frequently silenced or excluded from public debate and thus new spaces for protest (Butler, 2011; Lievrouw, 2011). Whilst this is occurring the policeman tries to silence Neville, despite the crowd showing interest in what he has to say. This is interesting for a number of reasons that are significant to our discussion.

Firstly, as Neville himself articulates, the action of the policeman to intervene in his speech reflects a racialised form of power operating in the space of protest, which identifies the 'loud' speech of a West Indian background man as a sign which disturbs 'white' understandings of propriety and order in public space. At one juncture in the video Neville highlights this refusal to acknowledge members of the black community as citizens who have a right to speak and act as a core reason for the tension felt between police and the black community, which Neville embodies in his speech.

Neville: Tell me to shut my mouth... I speak up, and because I speak up I get hassled. When I stand up for my rights to have a right to speak, just like any other citizen in this country, I get hassled [...] Why? Because I'm loud. I'm a West Indian. West Indians talk loud. That's how we are. But did they want to go and find out about that before they turned around and said I'm an aggressive person?

Here Neville highlights the kind of racism that is often experienced in everyday, public spaces, where the bodies and speech of minorities are encoded as dangerous in their 'unsanctioned' difference (Lobo, 2013) to white social norms and expectations of public engagement and speech, leading to actions that seek to suppress or exclude these expressions. This provides a vivid example of what Connolly (2010), Nayak (2010) and Lobo (2013) describe when they talk about whiteness as a 'force' which materialises in spatial relations of power, in disapproving gazes and in embodied gestures and actions in public which create 'affective pressures' (Connolly, 2010: 150). Lobo describes how these pressures are felt by their target in ways which, rather than subduing emotion, provoke equally embodied and affective modes of response, such as 'flared nostrils, heaving chests and defiant eyes embodying indignation' (Lobo, 2013). These relations are revealed in the Clapham Junction video in the way the policeman regards Neville's speech, not as an exercise of his civil rights, but as an expression of the untrammelled emotion that often leads to violence, and which therefore must be censured. And yet, it is also precisely the affective register of Neville's speech—the passionate anger he expresses—that provokes the crowd to listen to him, and to engage with his sense of outrage.

This leads to a second observation, which echoes Judith Butler's claim that the political is not only located in the ideas which are vocalised in speech or writing, but that the bodily act of speaking, or filming and uploading an event, is itself political insofar as it is an exercise of freedom, of the right to speak and act, often in defiance of powers that would seek to regulate such speech and action (Butler, 2011: 4). This is evident in the Clapham Junction speaker videos to the extent that, although Neville's speech is defiant in tenor, there is also an absence of a clear political message. This is made explicit one minute into the video when the producer of the video asks 'what is your message to the people?' to which he responds directly to camera saying 'I aint' got no message to the people' before speaking angrily about the Lord Mayor coming to Clapham Junction and being cheered by the crowd despite him doing nothing to stop the rioting. The political intervention here is Neville's speech act itself, in the force of his enraged, though measured affective disposition, with its rhythm, continuity and intensity sustained over the 20 minutes of the two videos and beyond them. It is also tied to the multiple acts of recording, video upload by activist Charlie Veitch, and by the capacity provided by Google for user comments, video responses, sharing and embedding across multiple sites.

The angry tenor of the speech and the physical presence of Neville on screen and within the crowd continue the logic of passionate protest and disaffection criticised by media commentators and politicians as beyond rational civic discourse. As what might be considered an antagonistic rant, where at points Neville shouts down others who challenge him, the monologue severs dialogue and serves as the kind of unchecked, one-way form of communication often feared of online bullies and trolls. The video producer at several points prompts Neville to keep him speaking. Neville identifies himself as a person who is victimised by police and accused of being 'aggressive' because of his cultural and racial background. In one of the only points at which he engages directly with others, he turns this accusation back onto a member of the crowd saying 'I didn't raise my hand to the officer, I didn't raise my hand to that arsehole over there'. This version of events is quickly contested by two members of the crowd (one of whom is the man he refers to) who claim that Neville had earlier told them he was going to 'beat them up' and 'burn their house down'. An angry confrontation erupts between the three men:

Bystander: You said you were going to burn his house down

Neville: Yeah? And why… And why?

Bystander: I'm just saying mate.

Neville: And why? [Neville repeats this loudly, drowning the man out]

Bystander: I don't know

Neville: Exactly, so shut up. You don't know [he keeps repeating loudly]

Bystander: You said you were going to take him around the corner and
                beat him up, and then you were going to burn his house
                down, so…

Neville: [talking over the top of him] You don't know what the argument
                was but you want to jump in too. So you want to shut up and
                find out the facts

Neville then turns and berates the crowd (who are starting to contest his mode of delivery), saying 'you don't know the facts so why chat?' Despite the asynchrony, or perhaps because of it, this antagonistic exchange also enlivens the YouTube comments field with commenters addressing Neville's refusal to answer the question and blaming his cultural background for his treatment. This contest is carried somewhat seamlessly into the YouTube comments field:

I'm the guy with his back to the camera. What this video doesn't show is this guy threatening to beat up someone else in the crowd, and telling him that he was going to burn his house down. This clown is a complete joke and should

*have been arrested instead of being given a platform to come out with his lies
and nonsense (k75pete, August, 2011)*

In response to this juncture in the video, at least on the surface, the comments space
seems to open up the possibility of unchecked flow of racial bigotry and vitriol. Many
users respond directly and aggressively to Neville on the points he makes on the basis
of an exclusionary racism, for example: 'IF YOU DONT LIKE UK WAY OF LIFE THEN FUCK
OFF AND GO AND LIVE ELSEWHERE YOU BUNCH OF RATS!!!!' (TheFlyingScotsman01,
August, 2011). Despite the obviously racist and aggressive tone of these comments, or at
least in part because of it, Neville's 20 minute monologue sustains a space where he is
not silenced but through speech enacts an antagonistic presence, embodies a point of
view, and carries his perspective beyond the limited boundaries and barriers of the street
to a newly constituted locale that now includes several hundred thousand onlookers and
several thousand responses continuing long after the events. For some commenters,
however, via the prompting, recording and uploading of the video by Charlie Veitch, Neville
comes to represent, on first appearance, the 'internet troll' (along the lines of Bergstrom's
2011 definition) who loudly, aggressively, violently and skilfully provokes, in this case on
the basis of a discourse of poverty and racial inequality. We will return to what can be
understood as an agonistic politics opened up by the often vitriolic and racially bigoted
exchanges online, but first turn to the audio-visual and communicative 'spaces of protest'
that are at play in the events on the streets at Clapham Junction on 9 August 2011, as
they are transformed by the modes of mediation and networked communication available
through YouTube.

Extending the Spaces of Protest:
Passion within and Beyond the Streets and Squares

Fuelling cycles of media attention and multiplying action and reaction, protest turns to riot
where it is intensified by the flow of passion in the overflow of disaffection, frustration,
rage and rampage and, above all, by affect unchecked by the normal constraints of social
order. City spaces along with corresponding institutions of law enforcement traditionally
impose the constraints that might keep such passion in check. However, as Nigel Thrift
describes in his account of affect, space and politics, cities can be understood precisely as
'roiling maelstroms of affect' (2007: 171). More than simply the socially articulated emotions
that accompany, for instance, civic discourse on race relations or low socio-economic
disadvantage, affect can be considered 'a set of embodied practices that produce visible
conduct as an outer lining', where context is vital, and where very often 'the source of
emotions seem to come from somewhere outside the body, from the setting itself' (Thrift,

2007: 171). To better account for the flow of affect across the dynamic scene of protest as described above, in this section we consider city and social media as equally active in supporting and modifying the conditions of aggressive protest. What we see in the England riots and other examples of protest and disorder is that the zones of inclusion and exclusion imposed by the city, by its 'material supports for life' (Butler, 2011) and sociality, but also by the barriers that designate spaces of public congregation and action, are disrupted and transformed by the alternative networks of communication and audio-visual materialities of messenger services, social media and social networking platforms.

Conflict, or even cruelty, can be positioned as central to the functioning life of the city as it is also mapped onto networked publics. For instance, Bülent Dicken's analysis of the problem of nihilism considers the city as a space of antagonistic conflict precisely to challenge the idea that violence, cruelty and irrationality are exceptions. Dicken looks to Nietzsche's depiction of the pre-Socratic Greek polis as a starting point, the success of which was 'its readiness to accept conflict as an ontological given, as part of life' (Dicken, 2009: 112). The polis took for granted the 'contestation of a plurality of antagonists' in a mode of politics able to 'accommodate cruelty' (Dicken, 2009: 113). Dicken identifies in the writing of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Mouffe the centrality of violence, passion and affect, framed as the omnipresent potentiality held within and mediated by the city: 'Even though the city is basically a reasonable form of human togetherness, passions thus remain significant elements of conduct in it. And because there are passions, social identities cannot be constituted independently from passion, or, antagonism' (Dicken, 2009: 114). For Spinoza (1951: 268), and Deleuze (1992) following him, the city is the solution because it organises encounters and relations and, as Thrift puts it, modifies or engineers affect. Above all, Deleuze says, 'A City is so much the better the more it relies on joyful affections: the love of freedom should outweigh hope, fear and confidence' (1992: 272). And in this way it helps to transform the violence of antagonism into active, productive forms of 'compatible association' (Deleuze, 1992: 265).

What the city as a collective, shared space preserves is the plurality of (passionate) thought and speech, even if at a price:

> what the citizen renounces by committing himself to a collective, common affection is his personal affection. Thus, even though freedom to act is sur-rendered to the city, 'affections of reason', that is, freedom of thinking and speech, cannot and should not be surrendered. That remains an indispensable natural right, the compromise of which is precisely what introduces violence into the city (Dicken, 2009: 117).

This is why discourses of inclusion and exclusion, of criminality, race and citizenship, become so central to the context of riotous protest. Likewise, destruction of property becomes the marker in terms of which actors fall outside of the rational contract of inhabitation in the city. And for Spinoza, it is 'fanaticism', and 'radical nihilism' in Dicken's terms, 'which turns to a wholesale destruction of the city' (2009: 117). In other words, protest fails to support 'compatible association' where its violence turns to its own destruction.

In scenes of riotous protest, damaged and burning buildings, ordinary objects such as bottles, bins, and cars take on and heighten an intensive energy. Normally, urban space is carefully designed to produce and modify affect as 'a form of landscape engineering' that has the purpose of maintaining socio-political order (Thrift, 2007: 171). Affect operates in the city as the 'remainder', as irrational and excessive, as forces that always threaten to exceed constraint, for instance in the case of crime, or the energy and potential violence of crowds. But in addition, local territories have their own 'emotional geographies' that are mapped onto attributes of race and social capital, so that belonging and exclusion are composed and negotiated by those who reside or pass through (Nayak, 2010). While commentators, politicians and police were quick to criminalise participants in the 2011 England riots and hence exclude them from legitimate citizenship and from public discourse, collective acts of rioting and property destruction emerge out of particular, localised contexts of affect and embodied history.

The 'Reading the Riots' report and subsequent research has traced some of this context in its geographically and historically contingent forms (see for example Hope, 2012). At a general level Lea and Hollsworth (2012) describe the violence as an outcome of 30 years of neoliberal social policy in the UK, which has dismantled the welfare safety net for the most disadvantaged and cut public spending to a range of youth services. In particular they argue that the self-organised aspects of the riot and riot response mirror government policy emphasis on 'localism and self-help'. Urban regeneration schemes have gentrified inner-city urban areas to the degree that poor residents are now treated as outsiders in their own communities, with signs of wealth and privilege beyond their means being 'flaunted' by the new urban consumer (Jeffrey and Jackson, 2012). Lagrange (2012) elaborates on these themes to argue that in both the UK and France the social life of many of the young people living in 'riot-affected' areas reflects these changes, with communities being increasingly 'fractured along class, racial and ethnic lines' (Hope, 2012: 3). In particular, there is an intensely felt spatial and local dimension to these perceptions of inequality, which is reflected in reportage on the riot experience in Clapham Junction and other spaces of unrest. The social geography of Clapham Junction is divided into the area 'south of the railway' where upwardly mobile and affluent professionals and families have moved in, and the area north of the railway, where there are a number of 'deprived' estates (Morrel et al., 2011: 17).

This notion of a divided community is also discussed by Spalek, Isakjee & Davies (2012) who describe the riots as a 'struggle over place and belonging' with the actions of the rioters representing an effort to 'take back the spaces from which they felt excluded' (2012: 14). This research does well to reveal the human geography of a building maelstrom of affect, but we can also consider the manner by which this 'boils over' through networked channels of communication that help to reconfigure the broader spaces of protest. We might say that in public protest, bodies act to 'make a claim in public space', but as Butler argues, this idea 'presumes that public space is given, that it is already public, and recognized as such' (Butler, 2011). For the England riots the spaces to be considered public are multiple, contested, and uncertain, often recognised as such only after the fact. What of the online spaces for replication and circulation and additional interventions – many of which are 'private' in the sense of being corporately owned and structured (by Google, RIM Blackberry IM systems, Twitter, Facebook)? Butler argues that assembly and speech reconfigure public space as potential spaces of protest, but that the crowds are increasingly moving outside the square and street.

> At such a moment, politics is no longer defined as the exclusive business of public sphere distinct from a private one, but it crosses that line again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighbourhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public square. (Butler, 2011)

The politics associated with these spaces of protest rely on the creation of multiple 'publics' distinguishable from what Michael Warner conceptualises as 'the public' as a 'kind of social totality' (Warner, 2002: 49). The distinction is important here for moving beyond the material constraints of city spaces, streets and squares or abstract ideals of democratic institutions and a 'fourth estate' to consider a public as composed also of so many micro encounters, relations, modes and platforms for expression, including online encounter and interaction. Publics and 'counterpublics', in Warner's sense, are dispersed, multiple, emerge around events or even texts, and are increasingly assembled through networked forms of access, communication and mediation. But likewise, 'virtual spaces' for protest are only virtual in the sense that online networks contain potentialities and capacities for acting and congregating, or for passionate investment in a cause, even if these capacities are not actualised or remain ineffectual. They are not immaterial, in fact just the opposite. Online publics also have to assemble and constitute around and through specific sites and events, images and acts. For instance, city squares and streets act as material supports for action, and themselves act as part of a struggle to constitute a public. But also, this struggle integrates with digital, networked forms of support, affecting the visible boundaries for activism, protest and provocation spatially and temporally.

Passion, disaffection, poverty, racism and inequality remain essential catalysts as individual and collective action (in the form of spatial occupation, speech, image creation and circulation, as well as physical confrontation and material destruction or theft) finds alternative outlets to the policed and barricaded streets. Baker (2011) argues that the rage and anger underlying the riot formations, whilst still emanating from structural issues pertaining to experiences of social disadvantage and inequality (particularly in the Tottenham riot) have also been joined by new experiences that have reshaped the riots' spaces of formation. A new type of crowd theory is required to account for the way that new media technologies have allowed collective forms of emotional community and public consciousness to emerge which 'traverse and intersect geographical public space and the virtual public sphere' (Baker, 2011). In the context of the England riots, Baker sees new media technologies as extending forms of reflexive communication, emotion and action beyond relations of spatial presence and proximity in ways that feed into new forms of consciousness and protest, allowing individuals to form publics capable of 'occupying' both geographic and virtual public arenas. And yet, while social network sites are identified as a technological innovation that produce new forms of connectivity and congregation, we are arguing here that it is excesses of emotion and acts of often aggressive provocation that maintain and sustain civic congregation across geographic and virtual public space. Passion and provocation are paramount.

Like Dicken, Butler insists on returning the space of protest to the body and its material supports in an attempt to account for those who remain foreign, excluded from the classical polis or the recognised public realm. And this echoes Nancy Fraser's critique of Jürgen Habermas' deliberative conception of the public sphere, a concept, Fraser argues, that is based on exclusion and the multiple counterpublics that exist often without voice or access to legitimate public discourse (Fraser, 1992; Papacharissi, 2010: 117). We can follow this logic into televisual and online spaces, not to designate an abstract, locationless space of protest, but to highlight the materiality of online protest and contest. Passion and affect flow spatially and temporally beyond the immediate scene of the street, to amplify it beyond its original staging—embodied here in the figure of Neville—and in the passion flowing through antagonistic and vitriolic comment exchanges that result in the posting of the videos by Charlie Veitch as a further act of online provocation.

Neville fights with his embodied presence, his dominating voice and continuous monologue to maintain an expressive space and an immediate public that forms around him on the street. But it is clearly a contest:

> *The policeman grabbed my arm because he wanted to take me over there so nobody could hear me say what I wanted to say. I didn't touch the policeman,*

I didn't come to him but I got grabbed anyway. For a person to have an argument you must have an argument with somebody else but I was the one that was grabbed—why? Because I'm loud, because I speak my mind and because I'm black. (Neville)

But these spatial disjunctions and contests are extended through the potential created by mobile audio-visual technologies and social media platforms to provoke the formation of additional emergent, more pluralistic publics. The passion expressed by Neville as 'The Clapham Junction Speaker' circumvents the material barriers put in place to distinguish legitimate (Johnston) from marginalised (Neville) speech. These processes reconstitute the local space of protest for the more dispersed public that forms online in the act of witnessing and responding. Through such multiple modes of mediation, the local is also 'recast outside itself in order to be established as local, and this means that it is only through a certain globalizing media that the local can be established, and that something can really happen there' (Butler, 2011: 8). To understand this flow of passion within and beyond the streets as constitutive of local and city spaces and sociality we can also turn to a line of political and social theory that considers the city as constitutive of forms of democratic society.

Social Media Acts of Provocation and Contest

As the contest moves between the crowd that envelops Neville's speech through mobile, networked mediation to the comments field of the YouTube videos, the local is recast outside itself to generate dispersed, multiple publics. The two Clapham Junction Speaker videos attracted around 400,000 views between them and 4,500 comments, mostly in the days and weeks following the events, but the comments and discussion continues on more than two years later. Neville's words, his presence and the image of the street as site of contested protest become significant, recursive provocations that refold the maelstrom of affect that flowed through the riots into the comments field. Provocation vitalises and intensifies social media publics in many dynamic and often contradictory ways (McCosker, 2014). We examine this sphere of expression and activity for its contribution to the ecosystem within which the England riots could unfold and resonate. Central to the sustained digital resonance of the riot and its dispersed voices of protest, is the contestation, the vitriol and passion that manifests in the commenting practices made available by YouTube.

The vitriolic expression and aggressive interaction surrounding the 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos within the YouTube comments field, like the riot and looting, could be

seen as simply aiming to disrupt and dismantle deliberative modes of discourse and civic participation. Similarly, the negativity, racism, bigotry and vitriol that fill the comments field might be understood to convey a sense of aggression that equates to the violence and destructiveness perpetrated 'in the streets'. However, such an equation glosses the productive potential of these modes of exchange and the sites that support them, which we locate in the totality of the spheres of expressive action that include Neville's speech, the act of recording and uploading it, the interjections from others within the crowd, and the multiplicity of voices that follow in YouTube's comments field (in addition to the many blogs and social network sites and forums in which it was embedded or discussed). The analysis here aims to capture the patterns and tenor of the expression and exchange that unfolded, and highlight some of the points at which the events on the streets provoked equally—but differently formulated—passionate responses online. In the context of the broader media landscape and the spatial politics discussed above, comment activity such as is evident here presents an opportunity to think through the contested notions of democratic participation, forms of citizenship, public action and legitimate protest.

One of the fears of under- or un-moderated online forums and large scale comment fields, particularly where they deal with sensitive topics such as the riots, is that they simply give voice to and perpetuate forms of bigotry and incite hatred and further violence. There are many examples of aggressive, vitriolic enmity expressed as responses to the 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos in ways that simply seek to disrupt Neville's point of view and his embodied position as of West Indian descent. For example: 'this guys a fucking twat more black people in jail cuz they commit more crime FACT its not racist its purely true' (xkallumx, August, 2011). But despite the obvious hostility, oppositional reaction of this sort often incorporates the commenter's point of view as an extension of the discourse, multiplying the voices able to emerge as part of this collective space for expression. For example:

> More black people are in jail because they commit more crimes. This is fact and his 'oh look at us we're so poor' argument is the same sort of shit the little fuckers try and use to justify what they done. Fuck that. I grew up poor. I still am poor and I get stopped by the old bill regularly but I don't feel the need to steal PS3's, xBox's and iPhones. Fucking waste men. Oh and Charlie Veitch is a cunt too. (ProperBoShank, August, 2011)

YouTube's user-based flag and removal system provides some moderation on the basis of Google's policy that prohibits racial vilification and violent incitement. While there is less vitriolic and extreme bigotry expressed in the comments than might be expected, race and class identity politics are clearly central throughout. For example, as a typical commenter

argues: 'The economic down turn and increase in fascist laws are effecting all races of this country, but if you think you are targets because of your race then you think these factors are only effecting you which is the delusion' (Danster82, August, 2011). In this vein, commenters often express their disagreement with Neville that racial inequality might be a factor in the tensions and generalised disaffection, and in the process disavow legitimate differentiation of experiences and the plurality of voices of protest. Nonetheless, this kind of disavowal is also contested, most effectively by the commanding centrality of Neville's continued monologue and presence.

As with much of the political discourse and public commentary surrounding the riots, including the perspective of Prime Minster David Cameron who designated rioters as 'criminals, pure and simple', and others who spoke of a 'feral underclass' (Hope, 2012; McDonald, 2012), race features throughout these exchanges as an exclusionary category and a field through which hostility could be expressed. This is not surprising given Chantal Mouffe's influential notion that 'democratic logics always entail drawing a frontier between 'us' and 'them', those who belong to the 'demos' and those who are outside it' (Mouffe, 2005: 4). One commenter, for instance, emphasises the link between race, social discordance and lack of 'reasonable' discourse:

> *sooo, the fact that he is west indian explains why he is yelling and telling people to shutup instead of speaking in what many people believe in, a reasonable tone for dialogue, well does this mean that the races can't live among each other in a comfortable harmony? I'm just asking (AK8591, August, 2011)*

Though a 'reasonable' tone of dialogue is called for, it often seems to be the elision of speech or the platform for protest that is sought under the guise of conditions of rational deliberative discourse, precisely what protesters, and Neville, must step outside of or persist in the face of in order to speak at all.

The value of the comment space, along with Neville's speech act and its recording and upload, is dismissed too quickly, however, if judged solely on the basis of whether they conform to the 'civil' operation of deliberative and consensual democratic public exchange. Some commenters defend Neville's speech act and recognise the difficult conditions from which it emerges; for example:

> *Government and media never broadcast people like this who know what's go-*
> *ing on instead they give us these out of touch idiot politicians who order peo-*
> *ple around but make everything worse. Yes man, don't know this man's name,*
> *but I'd like to hear him more! (TheAuthentikate, August, 2011)*

While many simply challenge or dismiss his points (and his right to speak) in order to proffer their own, others take up specific aspects of Neville's complaints, for example, regarding the role of policing:

> *'Where were you last night?' The Police aren't in their position to help the*
> *people, they're there to enforce compliance and generate revenue. This man*
> *knows it better than most and I'd guess... (continuityofliberty, August, 2011)*

A seemingly inexhaustible contest over causes and solutions unfolds through the comments, not always with detail and nuance, and not simply toward an outright victory of opinion or understanding, but in a mode of perpetual provocation:

> *He lost his credibility as soon as he talked simply about black people. I'm*
> *white as a sheet and the government and the system's always fucked with me.*
> *But does he mention white people being screwed with? (Bubo25, August, 2011)*

Responding to this comment, the following poster attempts to encourage an alternative, historically informed, perspective:

> *@Bubo25 - He is making the point that blacks are treated badly by the gov-*
> *ernment more so than white people. People that come with this 'you know*
> *where the door is' talk need to look at things from other people's perspectives.*
> *The government were the ones who encouraged west indians to come to this*
> *country in the first place throughout the 60's. Therefore making it their country*
> *too so don't then treat them like second class citizens (bahding165, August,*
> *2011)*

Though this kind of direct dialogue is less common than individual comments, it occurs too often to dismiss. In this vein, interested, and disturbed by what he sees as a key feature of internet comment cultures, Geert Lovink has noted comment posters' 'hostile

anxiety to engage with other neighboring voices' (2011: 58). He argues that: 'the actual existing lapse of rationality results in an avalanche of random and repetitive comments. There is a widespread unwillingness to reach consensus and to come to a conclusion in a debate' (Lovink, 2011: 58). While Lovink sees this—somewhat ambivalently—as a failing of the overabundance of internet comment fields and practices, it is precisely this lack of consensus, the evident irrationality and passionate individualism, as well as the intensity of emotion revolving around the continuous generation of provocation and (re)action that reveals the positive capacity of unmoderated comment spaces. That is, while not always dialogic in the strict sense of an ongoing conversation or consensus, the comment field as described here enables the emergence of 'a 'life politics' able to reach the various areas of personal life, creating a 'democracy of emotions'' (Mouffe, 2005: 15).

The kinds of provocative, often vitriolic and antagonistic but massively multiple expression acts throughout the comment fields, as well as in Neville's speech act, and Veitch's act of recording and uploading it to YouTube, enact agonistic forms of contest as an alternative model of citizenship, acts that incorporate forms of passion and conflict but are no less productive for it. These are not 'smart mobs' in Rheingold's (2002) celebratory understanding of online group action, or even a 'disunified multitude' as Papacharissi puts it (2010: 158). The acts remain almost primarily dissociated, impassioned expression relaying a range of points of view without an internal dialogical order. These can be conceptualised as acts of multiple initiations—of a space of protest, of a constitutive public, of passionate expression of the conditions of existence, of provocations for further exchange.

Conclusion

Provocation is uncomfortable because it straddles stasis and inertia, becoming the point of transition between one state and another. We take comfort, then, in naming and 'differentiating' the provocateur as, for example, activist, troll, or rioter. Isin and Nielsen consider the centrality of acts for the constitution of citizenship (2008). While for Isin 'acts of violence, hospitality, hostility, indifference, love, friendship and so on' are not reducible to citizenship, they can be intertwined in significant ways (Isin, 2008: 19). Drawing on Robert Ware (1973), Isin argues that 'the essence of an act, as distinct from conduct, practice, behaviour and habit, is that an act is a rupture in the given' (Isin, 2008: 25). That is, central to the infinitive verb form 'to act' is the sense of 'putting in motion', 'to begin, create or disrupt' (Isin, 2008: 21, 22). The force of an act, as a form of provocation becomes evident in this creative disruption that is equally constitutive of the individual or group: 'To act means to get something in motion, to begin not just something new but oneself as the being that acts to begin itself' (Isin, 2008: 27). Importantly, Isin's understanding of

acts of citizenship includes the potential to 'act up' as disgraceful or anti-social conduct. It points toward the kind of agonistic social formations outlined by Mouffe and Dicken, where passion and violence might be incorporated through city spaces, institutions of democracy along with new social media platforms. In short, and reflective of the possibilities of alternative spaces of protest such as those analysed here,

> *'Acts' are ruptures or beginnings but not impulsive and violent reactions to a scene. By theorizing acts, or attempting to constitute acts as an object of analysis, we must focus not only on rupture rather than order, but also on a rupture that enables the actor (that the act creates) to remain at the scene rather than fleeing it. (Isin, 2008: 27)*

A rupture in the given initiated through acts of provocation need not be borne out as violent destruction. Events such as the August 2011 England riots are a reminder that excesses of affect and passion remain fundamental forces in the city, but increasingly move between online, networked spaces of communication and 'congregation' in an extended geography and duration. Our analysis of the modes and spaces of protest as they move beyond the city streets and squares has sought to maintain this distinction between 'radical nihilism', as Dicken (2009) puts it, in which disaffection turns to violent destruction and looting, and forms of speech and spatial appropriation that also seek to disrupt but do so in order to turn antagonism into a more productive mode of democratic contest.

In our analysis of the 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos, Neville as speaker, Veitch as activist, YouTube as platform and the multiple commenters all play their part as critical provocateur. And there are many other possibilities for disruptive acts that should be supported and sustained, understood for their productive potential rather than condemned as equivalent to the violent destruction on the streets. These events are specific to the circumstances and material contexts that gave rise to them, yet share commonalities with other protest events in recent years under the banner of the Occupy movement or the many sites of protest and revolt throughout the Middle East. It may also be the case that these modes of civic participation can be initiated in ways that might become part of legitimate public discourse, before the eruption of violent destruction in the form of riot and looting. Such political aims require, however, acceptance of a model of democracy able to accommodate antagonistic contest in the form of pluralistic agonism.

Biographical Note

Anthony McCosker lectures and researches in Media and Communications at Swinburne University. His research explores affect as embodied in pain, violence and conflict across visual and networked media, and has been published in journals such as *Convergence*, *Information, Communication and Society*, *Continuum*, *Sexualities*, and *Transformations*. He is author of the book *Pain, Affect and Visual Culture: Intensive Media*, (2013, Palgrave Macmillan).

Dr Amelia Johns is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University. Her recently completed PhD explored experiences of intercultural contact between youth in multicultural urban space, and how these encounters produce racism, intolerance and violent conflict alongside 'hybrid' identifications and expressions of belonging. Her work has been published in *Continuum*, and will also be appearing in a forthcoming book, *Critical Youth Studies for the 21st Century*. Her current research reflects an interest in young people's experiences of new media as spaces where social and cultural identity, citizenship and experiences of embodiment are resituated and transformed.

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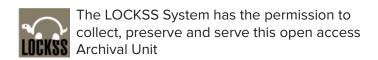
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