
Students' Views on the Riots

TOM YOUNG & KATE STEVENSON

ABSTRACT Reflecting two students views on this summers riots, Tom Young locates the riots as a symptom of 20th century consumerism. Tracing the historical development of public relations and advertising with the rise of one of the 20th century's least known and most influential figures 'Eddy Bernays', he asks the question - who's really to blame for the riots? Following this, Kate Stevenson puts herself at the heart of the debate and looks at how we locate ourselves within the traditional perspectives of political Left and Right.

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In an age of instantaneous and often impulsive television news headlines, it would seem that there's always an *event* that dominates the modern political agenda. As a platform for reactionary policies and vote-winning politics, following the scenes of public disorder and chaos that occurred across English streets during August, this summer's *event* was undoubtedly the so-called 'Riots' in London and other major English cities.

It is an event that will define a generation and an event that will redefine the socio-political sphere for many years to come. However, it is also an event that in this age of all-demanding 24-hour news has summoned little in the way of new and useful ideas from a political establishment whose ideas resemble little more than a caricature of big state/little state idealism and the feigned postures of a tired and exhausted Left and Right. To truly understand the 'Riots', it is my view that we need to think beyond the now. Whilst our politicians battle to 'loot' the central narrative of the 'Riot' as that of the great British broken society or as an excuse for renewed enthusiasm in an ideologically crippled Welfare State, I believe that we need to ask a greater question of ourselves and question the priorities that we have defined as important to us. I propose that central to understanding the 'Riots', we need to understand the monster that is consumerism. This is a construction of the

twentieth century that traces its roots back to a distant American past and a man named Eddy Bernays, who as the creator of public relations and the father of modern advertising techniques went on to become one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century.

The nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays was a man governed by the belief that 'the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in [a] democratic society' (Bernays, 1928, p. 9). Having worked through the ranks of the American propaganda machine during the First World War, Bernays had witnessed first hand both the success and the power of propaganda. It was a period of great unity in which America had been consciously pushed to collectively stand behind 'Wilsonian Idealism'. However, for Bernays it wasn't so much the political ideals of President Wilson that became his concern; it was the mechanisms behind the campaign: the mechanics of propaganda and the mechanics of public control.

In many ways Bernays was a revolutionary. In his seminal 1928 text, *Propaganda*, he put forward the idea that of course 'we are governed, our minds moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested', but he also argued that we are 'largely [governed] by men we have never heard of' (Bernays, 1928, p. 9). Whilst for Bernays this represented a 'logical result of the way in which [a] democratic society [must be] organised', he questioned the authority of those behind the American propaganda machine and asked if the active control of mass or public will could be used towards an alternative focus. Shifting beyond politics to the use of propaganda to question and motivate public support for education, Bernays then began to develop an understanding of what would become the propagandist mechanics underpinning consumerism that would not only define his career but would shift the direction of the twentieth-century man towards the creation of the all-powerful consuming self.

Having moved to the USA as a child, Bernays had maintained a somewhat distant relationship with Freud but after rebranding the mechanics of propaganda as a new science of 'public relations' in the late 1920s, Bernays began his enquiry into Freud's theory on the human condition. Developing the idea of a link between Freud's theories on the unconscious desire of man and the conscious manipulation of the masses extolled through the propaganda machine; Bernays proposed that if one could communicate the idea that a product is able to satisfy the fulfilment of our unconscious human desires, it will develop the notion that happiness or fulfilment could be achieved through the consumption of that product. It was a truly revolutionary idea and it presented a significant shift in the principles underpinning the uses of propaganda. However, this idea that the fulfilment of our unconscious human desires could be related to the things that we consume returns the focus of my argument to suggest that at the heart of our understanding of the 'Riots' we must propose the idea that perhaps somewhere behind the motivations of those involved is the image of Bernays' all-consuming self.

Like the large majority of the United Kingdom population I stand in condemnation of many of the events that occurred during August, but the answers I seek do not exist in such ludicrous headline-grabbing solutions as the idea that we should remove social housing from those who were involved, or the even more ridiculous idea that what these youngsters need is a healthy dose of military authoritarianism in their schools. Whilst I point to Bernays and the creation of the all-consuming self as an explanation, it is not my intention to provide it as an excuse. We live in a world defined by the things that we own and if we return to Bernays' assertion that 'we are governed, our minds moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested' (1928, p. 9), then the act of stealing trainers, sportswear or TVs simply reflects the fulfilment of a self that we as a society have instructed our children to become. Whilst I reject the idea that this article might be interpreted as an attempt to justify criminality, at the heart of our response to the so-called 'Riots' we must attempt to understand a disenfranchised generation for whom the very idea or mark of personal success in their individual or collective selves is not found in the structures of politics or education; it is found in the things that they own and it is found in the stuff that they have.

Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war ... our Great Depression is our lives. (Fight Club, 1999)

References

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I initially struggled when asked to write an article on the recent riots: on which side of the debate would I stand? Would I take my usual left-wing stance, blaming the effects of capitalism and cuts – the toxic mix of deprivation and

materialism? Possibly. But then again, surely it would seem not only naïve, but even distasteful, to suggest that the killing of three innocent men could be explained away and glorified by calling it 'class consciousness'. So then perhaps I could side with the Right, blaming a moral degeneration and a 'feral underclass'? Again, this theory seems to hold some truth in certain cases, but could I really deny that many of the rioters were just the same as the student protesters months before, except without the social benefits of A levels and money – a background that had made them delinquent instead of eloquent? No, this would seem equally absurd.

When I had participated in the student protests in autumn 2010, including witnessing at close quarters the events at Millbank, the issues had seemed very straightforward. Right and wrong was as clear as the difference between Left and Right. But as I watched the riots unfolding on TV from my living room, the issues looked much more complex. The certainties I had experienced in the student protests seemed a lot less certain as I watched the riots. The uncertainty felt uncomfortable.

The labels 'left' and 'right' have divided the political world, and consequently have become so ingrained within us that it often seems that we impose these two categories on the way in which we perceive everything. But are we not forgetting that 'left' and 'right' are just labels that somebody once invented to describe a set of values? We talk of them as if they actually exist. However, the real world does not divide itself into opposites such as 'left and right' or 'right and wrong', and by attempting to fit explanations into these 'opposing' categories we are often in danger of grossly oversimplifying the complex and nuanced political world by boxing it into simple, if unreal, 'either-or' binaries.

Even worse than labelling explanations or points of view as being on 'wings', we label *ourselves* as being on a 'wing' and often dismiss anything from the other 'side', before we have considered evidence or reason. We like to think of ourselves as being reasonable, intellectual beings, but often, perhaps, we are guilty of being blinded by our own stubbornness and desire to keep things simple. How often have we selectively chosen evidence to be 'consistent' with our 'wing', instead of letting our views be guided by the evidence?

Of course, the way we view evidence and events will always be shaped by our political perspectives, and we can never escape this. This subjectivity is no bad thing; however, we are at risk of constricting any development when we are so obstinate in our views that we refuse to even consider another point of view. Instead of open-minded debate, political discourse is frequently reduced to point-scoring rhetoric and glib remarks. But why do we so often do it? Is it that we are afraid of admitting to ourselves that issues are more complex than we want them to be? Is it that we find some views unsavoury, and therefore choose to ignore them? Is it that we're embarrassed that someone might call us 'right wing'?

A vast number of explanations have been offered as to the cause of the riots, ranging from social exclusion to social networking sites. The riots have

been used to promote various political agendas, from far-left groups preaching that the 'revolution is nigh' to the right-wing groups seeking excuses to cut benefits even further. So where do we begin to reason and research on a topic that is so subjective? How do we not only identify the problems, but begin to fix them? In my opinion, the best foundation would be to recognise precisely that it *is* so subjective, be aware of the downfalls of our own biases, and not rush into uninformed opinion, but instead simply step back and detach ourselves from thinking in the simple terms of 'wings', and wrongs and rights. Surely, the best place to begin any research or exploration is with an open mind, and the words 'I don't know'.

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