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Reading the Riots: Manchester's Community Conversation

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with an introduction by Dan Silver (Social Action & Research
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Reading the Riots: Manchester Community Conversation

Background and introduction

The riots that took place in England during the summer of 2011 shocked the nation. However, the Prime Minister chose to blame the riots on “criminality, pure and simple”¹. Further, the subsequent lack of a public inquiry, similar to the one undertaken by Lord Scarman following riots in 1981², has left a significant void in the evidence needed to explain the 2011 riots and to help guide the subsequent policy responses that are necessary³.

The *Guardian* and London School of Economics (LSE) ‘Reading the Riots’ project has sought to redress this gap⁴. As part of ‘Reading the Riots’, researchers spoke with over 270 rioters across England and found that hostility to the police, dislocation from society and inequality were major factors behind people of all ages taking to the streets, alongside the often cited consumerist urge to “get some free stuff”⁵.

Despite these clear commonalities, there were discernible geographical disparities in the way that the riots developed, which were bound up in specific historical and social contexts⁶.

The north of England in particular is suffering disproportionately from the ill-effects caused by the recession and the subsequent government responses. For instance, Area Based Grants, which targeted investment in areas in need of regeneration and which laid great emphasis on tackling worklessness, have been ended. This has had significant impact in the North West, in which 21 of 39 local authority areas were in receipt. At the same time, the representation of northern voices in government is shrinking⁷.

¹ Seumas Milne, *These riots reflect a society run on greed and looting*. (London: The Guardian, 10 Aug 2011). Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/10/riots-reflect-society-run-greed-looting> (Accessed: 7 Mar 2012).

² BBC News, *Q&A: The Scarman Report*, (London: BBC News, 27 Apr 2004). Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/3631579.stm (Accessed: 7 Mar 2012).

³ Dan Silver, *Reading the Riots: Community Conversations in the north*. (London: The Guardian, 10 Feb 2012). Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/the-northerner/2012/feb/10/manchester-liverpool-salford-riots-youth-regionalgovernmentoffices-abg> (Accessed: 7 Mar 2012)

⁴ Reading the Riots (London: The Guardian, 2011). Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots> (Accessed: 7 Mar 2012).

⁵ Silver, *Reading the Riots*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

Regional Government Offices, which provided a link to Westminster, have been removed⁸. Further, there are very few northern Conservative MPs. Consequently, one could argue that current government policy is rooted in a reality that northern people do not recognise⁹.

Although the behaviour of the rioters is not to be condoned, the voice of northern communities deserves to be heard. Therefore, Salford's Social Action & Research Foundation (SARF)¹⁰, worked with the *Guardian* and LSE to put on the Manchester Reading the Riots Community Conversation¹¹.

The Manchester Community Conversation provided an opportunity to contribute invaluable evidence to the national response. It is hoped that the results of the Manchester Community Conversation, together with others held across England, will shed light on to the wider debate concerning the 2011 riots¹².

Dan Silver
Salford
February 2012

The following is a report from the Manchester Community Conversation. It is not a verbatim report, but is written to provide a substantial summary of the salient points discussed. The notes from the Community Conversation were taken in long-hand by myself on the day. Therefore, any mistakes are purely my own and I apologise in advance to any contributors cited should I misquote them or take their comments and views out of context in any way.

Andy Rawling
Manchester
March 2012

⁸ BBC News, *Regional government offices face axe* (London: BBC News, 22 Jul 2010) Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-10728140> (Accessed: 8 Mar 2012).

⁹ Silver, *Reading the Riots*.

¹⁰ Social Action & Research Foundation. (Salford: SARF, 2012). Available at: <http://www.the-sarf.org.uk/> (Accessed: 7 Mar 2012).

¹¹ SARF also convened a further Community Conversation in Salford. Silver, *Reading the Riots*.

¹² Silver, *Reading the Riots*.

Manchester's Community Conversation

Amina Lone (SARF) chaired the conversation and introduced attendees to the panel: Ruth Ibegbuna (Reclaim¹³); Farida Anderson MBE (Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group - PoPs¹⁴); Detective Chief Superintendent Russ Jackson (Greater Manchester Police); Pat Karney (Manchester City Councillor); Mags Casey (Reading the Riots Researcher); Symeon Brown (The Guardian); Dan Silver (SARF)

Lone explained that the purpose of the conversation was not to apportion blame, but discuss what happened in 2011 and explore what we can do in the future to hopefully avoid a repetition of the previous year's rioting.

Dan Silver explained the role and purpose of SARF, and its aims to co-produce policy solutions to eradicate poverty. Silver reminded attendees that the 'Reading the Riots' project was created due to the government's decision not to hold a public inquiry into the 2011 riots. In addition to this, and especially from SARF's perspective, 'Reading the Riots' took on more saliency owing to the Prime Minister's comments that the 2011 riots were "not political protest, or a riot about protest or politics—it was common or garden thieving, robbing and looting, and we do not need an inquiry to tell us that."¹⁵ However, research from the University of Manchester has shown that most rioters came from poor areas, which suggests that more complex issues are at stake than the Prime Minister is acknowledging. Also, given that much of the focus on the 2011 riots comes from, and is placed upon, London, SARF seek to ensure that the 'northern' perspective is taken into account.

Symeon Brown next addressed the conversation, seconding Silver's view that the debate should not be about London only. Brown further explained how the LSE / Guardian project was created to fill the vacuum left by the failure to hold a public inquiry following the 2011 riots.

¹³ RECLAIM is a multiple award winning leadership and mentoring project based in Manchester. The project empowers young people across the North West to make positive changes in their communities and to find inner strength and self belief.

¹⁴ A charity that works to: identify solutions to the issues faced by offender's families; give offender's families a voice at all stages of the Criminal Justice System; provide assistance and advice; support, administer or set up other Charities; encourage access for families at relevant working parties and advisory groups; promote equality and diversity.

¹⁵ Prime Minister speaking to a debate on public disorder in the House of Commons, 11 Aug 2011. (London: They Work For You). Available at: <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2011-08-11a.1051.0#g1075.4> (Accessed: 8 Mar 2012).

Brown informed attendees that the research, which involved talking to those who had participated in the riots, had revealed the following common themes regarding what was the motivation for taking part in the rioting:

- Reaction to police use of 'stop and search'
- Political discontent (although various issues were raised, such as cuts to youth services and educational maintenance allowance, no one single issue dominated. Rather, a general sense of discontent with the political climate was expressed)
- Poverty (the rioters came from poor areas, and they expressed a general sense of injustice at the prevailing socio-economic climate)
- Curiosity and excitement (rioters explained how they saw trouble on TV or heard about it on the radio and initially went downtown to 'have a look at what was going on', but eventually became caught up in events).
- History making (rioters were aware of the 1981 riots and their historical significance. Consequently, they saw 2011 as their chance to be part of history in the making).
- Some rioters' motivations were purely criminal, and saw the riots as an opportunity to loot.
- Police seen as just another gang. Further, according to the BBC, the Metropolitan Police itself boasts of being the biggest gang in town¹⁶. Therefore, the temporary truces between gangs in order to take on the police were seen by those involved as a gang fight.

With regard to gangs, Brown explained that 'Reading the Riots' has not found any evidence to suggest that gangs instigated the violence, but they were definitely involved once the rioting began.

Brown concluded by saying that 'Reading the Riots' research is still ongoing; therefore a full, considered conclusion is not yet available. However, 'Reading the Riots' is able to say that there is no one simple cause or explanation as to why the 2011 riots happened. Rather, the picture is very complex and nuanced. And such a broad picture demands a broad spectrum of views; hence, the Community Conversations.

¹⁶ BBC News, *More than 200 held as Met Police crack down on gangs*. (London: BBC News, 8 Feb 2012). Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-16940160> (Accessed: 7 Mar 2012).

Pat Karney addressed the conversation, explaining how important it is that the Community Conversations take place, that the 2011 riots were a momentous occurrence, and that we have hard lessons to learn from the events. Karney then asked attendees to recall the 2011 events in Manchester and described his own, first hand experiences of the first night of violence.

Karney described how a gang of about 40 young men, some wearing balaclavas and others wielding baseball bats, careered down Market Street in Manchester city centre, causing passers-by, pedestrians and shoppers to scatter in fear. Karney himself took shelter in the Marks and Spencer department store, where the gang proceeded to hammer on the store's windows. Inside, people cowered, fearing that the gang was about to attack them. Karney noticed that the gang were using their Smartphones to film the fearful reaction of those inside the store.

To contrast this, Karney explained the very positive reaction of the people of Manchester the following day.

The next day, Mancunians rallied in the city centre with yard brushes and dustbin bags and cleaned up the city. Also, people returned to work and retailers opened their stores.

For Karney, the frightening events of the riots and the positivity of the clean up the following day illustrated vividly the negative and positive nature of the 2011 riots. That a whole collection of people were caught up in the riots and in a variety of ways: from rioters to those who wanted to clean up the city the next day; from innocent people to outright criminals; and somewhere in between, casual onlookers who got carried away.

Mags Casey explained how she was not convinced by the Prime Minister's analysis of the riots. In researching for 'Reading the Riots', Casey spoke with those who had participated in the riots, or to those who were family and friends of rioters. Casey explained that her motivation for doing so was that the government had seemed to show no interest in hearing what people had to say about the riots. By contrast, however, Casey said that her experiences when researching the riots were that people were only too eager to discuss the events of 2011.

Casey described to attendees how every story she encountered was different, which in itself contravenes the view that the rioters were 'a faceless mob'. Also, as with Brown previously, Casey's research revealed similar common themes: curiosity and excitement (some of those Casey spoke to felt that the way the media reported the riots fuelled the curiosity and excitement); tensions with the police; sense of injustice; sense of inequality; anger at

bankers and MPs over the economy and the expenses controversy; the chance to use the riot as an opportunity to loot.

Detective Chief Superintendent Russ Jackson spoke to the conversation, explaining that the police have not found any evidence to suggest that disenfranchised youth nor organised criminal gangs were behind the rioting. Jackson then gave a chronological account of the riots in Manchester, explaining that officers in Manchester had originally been asked to go to London when the riots initially started in Tottenham. Although Manchester police had received no intelligence reports saying that riots would start in Manchester, the police did anticipate that this could well be the case. Jackson explained that the riots in Manchester began at 4pm, but by 2am the police had re-established control.

231 people were arrested, of which 184 had previous criminal convictions. 131 of those arrested came from Manchester, with the remainder coming from elsewhere in Greater Manchester. However, none of those arrested came from Bolton or Wigan.

Whilst the focus of the conversation concerned the Manchester riots, Jackson did explain how the police did feel that the rioters in Salford appeared more organised than those in Manchester. Further, from their experiences on the night and subsequent conversations with those who they had encountered from the riots, the police have come to the view that amongst those involved in the rioting was a significant element who genuinely believed that their behaviour, rioting, was actually acceptable.

Ruth Ibegbuna observed that some young people were very angry, whilst others were so willing to clean up the city after the riots? This observation prompted Ibegbuna to ask what it is that differentiates the two groups. Ibegbuna said that when the riots started in London it was almost inevitable that Manchester would follow. And it was at that point when we should have spoken with our young people. But instead, we hurried home, shut our doors, and settled down to watch the riots on TV.

Ibegbuna explained that many young people do not like the police. However, much of this can be attributed to the lack of communication between young people and the police. For example, the police do not come into the schools to work with the children, unlike other services such as the Fire Brigade. However, Ibegbuna saved her strongest criticism for the media.

For Ibegbuna, the media's coverage and reaction to the riots was appalling. The seemingly unchallenged use of words such as 'feral' to describe young people was particularly distasteful. Further, when some of the young people

Reclaim work with went to London to meet the media in order to challenge such perceptions, they were ignored. Indeed, even the Guardian newspaper refused to meet with the young people from Reclaim.

Farida Anderson MBE told the conversation that during the 1981 riots she understood the anger of the rioters. However, in 2011 she found herself feeling fearful during the riots. Anderson said that this change in her own feelings may well be to do with her age, or being a parent, or perhaps a combination of both. Nevertheless, Anderson observed that people were genuinely fascinated by the 2011 riots, but for reasons she cannot explain.

Anderson further observed how different policing is in the 21st century compared to the 1980s. She also observed that none of the rioters spoken to by the researchers had mentioned bad parenting, even though this has been a populist suggestion offered as to the cause of the riots¹⁷. This observation led Anderson to ask if it was not the rioters who mentioned bad parenting as a cause of the problem, then who did?

Following the opening statements from the panel, Lone invited attendees to join the conversation with their comments and questions.

‘What methodology have the police used to support their claim that there are no disenfranchised youths?’

Jackson responded by saying that the police would never claim that their findings on this matter are academically uncontestable. However, the feedback that they have received from the communities and community groups they work with has not suggested any evidence that youth feel disenfranchised. At the same time, however, the police would never claim that they do not have a further journey to take regarding positive engagement with young people.

Karney added that there is no doubting that we live in an unequal society. As such we are presented with two choices: we can either take the right wing, reactionary view or we can be progressive. Just as it is easy for the right wing to blame young people and demand that they be thrown into prison, it is just as easy to lay all the blame at the door of the police. However, we have to appreciate that the police have a very difficult job, and especially during a riot.

¹⁷ Laura Clark, *Parents who failed to put their children to bed on time are accused of causing London riots*. (London: Mail online, 31 Jan 2012). Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2094086/Parents-neglected-basic-duties-accused-causing-London-riots.html> (Accessed: 7 Mar 2012).

'Is there any difference between what people said at the time of the riot and what they said after they were arrested. Have those arrested justified / politicised their actions as part of a post-event rationalisation process?'

Casey said that she had encountered very little post-event rationalisation during her research. On the contrary, people were very open in accounting for their actions, including expressing their regret for what they had done. Nevertheless, those Casey had spoken too did genuinely feel angry towards a wide concept of injustice, perceived or otherwise.

'Were rioters fit to be considered as 'proper Mancs''¹⁸

Karney said that his language on the day after the riots may have been emotionally charged. However, what he was trying to express at that time was that he felt that the rioters did not represent Manchester. Rather, those who turned out on the day after the riot to clean up the city were the true face of Manchester.

'Does the jailing of those who tried to organise riots on Facebook put online freedom of speech in jeopardy? Should the web be turned off during riots?'

Jackson said that the web would not be turned off during riots or at any other time, nor should it be. Britain is a democracy and the police will always defend both. However, inciting riots on the web is a crime. Nevertheless, when sentencing people for inciting riots on the web, foolishness as well as maliciousness should be taken into account.

'What platform is there for young people to oppose government cuts etc?'

Ibegbuna felt that there was no platform for young people. Further, when they are given a platform, politicians use it for a good photo opportunity but nothing more.

Karney added that we must encourage young people to participate in the democratic process, including taking part in demonstrations. Karney felt that we currently have a 'divide and rule' socio-political climate, and we must unite in order to avoid surrendering the middle ground to the extreme.

Anderson called for greater outreach: that we must go to where the young people are rather than expecting them to come along to our own meetings etc.

¹⁸ BBC News, *Hundreds join city clean-up after riots*. (Manchester: BBC, 10 Aug 2011). Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-14478902> (Accessed: 8 Mar 2012).

'Is the "I heart Manchester" campaign too corporate? Selling "I heart Manchester" hoodies the day after the riot was most ironic'

Ibegbuna replied that "I heart Manchester" had raised a lot of money for charity, including 4k for Reclaim, but agreed that the campaign must have a deeper reach. Ibegbuna suggested that the next phase of "I heart Manchester" should feature people's reasons for loving Manchester rather than merely stating "I heart Manchester".

Karney said that he stands by the campaign. That economic activity was down by 60% the day after the riot; therefore, he was not embarrassed by "I heart Manchester" having a commercial angle.

Jackson concurred with Karney, adding that "I heart Manchester" provided an outlet for Mancunians who were unhappy about the riots.

'How do we encourage youth enterprise?'

Ibegbuna said that we should encourage young people to empower themselves by sharing our skills with them. Also, public spaces must become more accessible to young people. Some community halls can cost up to £200 per hour for hire.

Anderson added that resources are a challenge, but PoPs proves that you can get by on scant resources. Further, it is too easy to blame the police and politicians for our problems. Rather, we must ask ourselves what we are doing to help young people and our communities.

The Future

Lone requested that the remainder of the conversation should be used to consider the future, and invited Niall Power of City South Manchester Housing Trust (City South) to make a short presentation to the conversation.

City South is a not-for-profit landlord managing and improving homes in the Fallowfield, Hulme, Moss Side, and Whalley Range districts of Manchester¹⁹. Power informed the conversation that City South has a project called 'The Works', which is a one-stop-shop that provides support for local people to find jobs, develop skills and access training courses and financial advice²⁰.

¹⁹ City South Manchester Housing Trust. Available at: <http://www.citysouthmanchester.co.uk/> (Accessed: 8 Mar 2012).

²⁰ The Works. Available at: http://www.citysouthmanchester.co.uk/news_publications/news_stories/the_works.htm (Accessed: 8 Mar 2012).

Power explained how City South attempts to engage youth through outreach work, going to places where young people go rather than trying to “drag them along to our own boring meetings”. The purpose of this work is to ‘sell’ all that Manchester has to offer to its young people, and Power called upon the conversation to do likewise.

As an example of such opportunities, Power cited young people’s drama groups at the Royal Exchange Theatre. However, Power observed that these groups are overwhelmingly attended by young middle class people. Therefore, Power called upon the conversation to work towards opening up such doors of opportunity for young working class people too.

Following Power’s presentation, Lone invited further comments and questions, reminding attendees to focus upon the future.

‘Going forward, what role should our educational institutions take?’

Ibegbuna called for a wholesale revamp of the national curriculum, arguing that with the emphasis being weighted so heavily upon achieving higher and higher grades, the curriculum has become boring and stale for pupils and teachers alike.

Anderson said that schools have a vital role to play in the future as they are the only place where all of our children gather together. Therefore, schools are central to our communities, providing the vital link between families and children. However, Anderson warned that for far too long now we have demanded that our teachers not only be teachers, but that they should also be social workers, counsellors, and accountants. Therefore, Anderson made an appeal to allow our teachers the freedom to be teachers.

Karney supported Anderson, saying that parents are the most influential figures in our children’s lives, and that teachers provide a vital link between home and school. Karney went on to describe teachers as heroes who are performing a great job, and especially at a time when public servants are being undermined both politically and in sections of the mainstream media.

‘Why is the government refusing to hold a public inquiry? This angers young people as it seems that the government and the media are far more concerned with looting of shops and damage to property than they are towards young people affected by knife crime and gang violence.’

Ibegbuna concurred with the questioner, saying that the young people at Reclaim have also remarked that looting and damage to property makes the front pages, whereas victims of knife crime and so on barely get a mention.

Jackson reminded the conversation that not too long ago Manchester was known as 'Gunchester'. However, through partnership working with the council, communities, and the police, Manchester in 2012 is a world away from 'Gunchester'. Therefore, Manchester's police are confused by the Prime Minister's belief that we have a lot to learn from the United States²¹, when in fact it is the police departments of the United States that come to Manchester's police force to ask for advice on how to tackle gun and gang crime.

Karney expressed his concerns that young people seem to be opting out of society, and primarily because society is turning its back on them.

Concurring with Karney, Casey argued that the government must show our young people that they care about them. At the moment, however, the government is not doing that.

Close of the Community Conversation

All members of the panel informed the conversation that they would be feeding back to their respective constituencies all they had gained from the conversation. Lone thanked all the panel members and all attendees for their time, comments and questions and brought the conversation to a close.

²¹ Paul Bignell, *PM's plans to import US adviser angers police chiefs*. (London: The Independent, 14 Aug 2011). Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/exclusive-pms-plan-to-import-us-adviser-angers-police-chiefs-2337445.html> (Accessed: 8 Mar 2012).

Conclusions

The Manchester Community Conversation was a suitably long and involved discussion, covering a wide spectrum of concerns and issues regarding the 2011 riots in Manchester.

As was stated by Brown at the start of the conversation, the work of 'Reading the Riots' is still ongoing; therefore it is not yet possible to produce any final analysis. However, the Manchester Community Conversation did produce some general consensuses.

Whilst all of those present, panel members and attendees, had perspectives as to what underpinned the riots that were as varied as those cited by the rioters themselves, there was a consensus that the government's response has been inadequate. Whether the riots were blatant criminality, the consequences of disenfranchising our youth, poverty, unemployment, or a combination of any and/or all of these factors, it was the feeling of the conversationalists that the issues underpinning the riots must be investigated further. In 1981, the Scarman Report was produced, which did result in various initiatives, some successful, others not so. Nevertheless, the very fact that the government responded to widespread rioting in 1981 by launching a public inquiry sent out a message to the people that the government was listening.

Further consensus was reached over the need to avoid falling into a culture of blame.

In keeping with Lone's direction, the overwhelming view of the conversationalists was that apportioning blame was reactionary and self-defeating. Conversationalists felt that it is far too easy to blame the police, politicians or delinquent youths for all our problems. Rather, we, as a community, have to take responsibility and ask ourselves what we can do to make our city a better and more inclusive place to live.

Communication was another recurring theme of the conversation. It would appear that we simply do not speak and socialise with one another. This leads to disconnect between: young people and older people; families and schools; communities and police; people of different socio-economic backgrounds. In short, we are not as strong a community as we may like to think we are. Although the response to the riots, such as the clean-up and "I heart Manchester", was very positive and well received, how permanent will this unity be?

A final observation, and one which contrasts sharply with one of the key findings of the Scarman report, was the absence of racism. None of the

conversationalists, either panel members or attendees, cited racial tension as possible causes of the riots. Further, neither was racism cited by the 'Reading the Riots' researchers as a possible cause underpinning the riots. The only reference to a possible racial issue was when one questioner enquired as to the ratio of white people arrested to those from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic communities. In response to this, the conversation was informed that the majority of those arrested were white. In the light of recent debates questioning the sustainability of a genuine multi-cultural society²², it was most interesting that racial tensions were not cited or raised. And this latter point was most encouraging for those of us who hold fast to the conviction that only a genuinely multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society provides for the enormous health, wealth and benefits that Manchester enjoys today.

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March 2012

²² BBC News, *State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron*. (London: BBC News, 5 Feb 2011). Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994> (Accessed: 8 Mar 2012).

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