

**GEA-funded postgraduate student reports from the conference
'Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The riots one year on',
held on 28th September 2012 at The Weeks Centre, London South
Bank University**

Ester McGeeney, PhD candidate, The Open University:

At the end of last month I started my week with a colleague from Sussex University, a few of our new masters students and a trip to the [CLF theatre](#) in Peckham Rye. We were there to watch *The Girls* – a play based on the lives of the four young people who performed in the play. The play was set at a group counselling session in South London. Four young people turned up and waited for the counsellor who never arrived. And as they waited, London started rioting and as the news of the looting and violence poured in via their mobile phones, the on-stage drama followed each young person's story - the mistakes they had made, the anger and pain they had experienced and the hopeless, stuck position in which they found themselves. This was a harrowing welcome to child hood and youth studies for the new students. As a youth practitioner and researcher I think I am pretty hardened to harrowing tales of young peoples' sexual exploitation, domestic violence, neglect, hunger, gang violence, anger, loss and pain, but the raw emotion and hopelessness of this play still hit me hard.

My week ended at London South Bank University in rooms packed full of politicised anger and intellectual energy at the conference, *Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: the riots one year on*. This was my opportunity to look theoretically and analytically at the kinds of lives, politics and emotions that had been so powerfully thrown at me in the South East London studio on Monday night. The conference was packed full of speaker panels and parallel paper sessions, with passionate debate and discussion squeezed in between. As I rushed off at the end of the day to catch a train out of London my head was pulsing from being bombarded with intellectual ideas, questions and critiques and from the repeated accounts of the increasing socio-economic inequality in Britain that is impacting on the lives and futures of the young people I work with and research. As I sat on the train I started to write this blog, the woman next to me tapped me on the shoulder. She asked me what I was writing and I poured it all out; police community relations, racism, the demonization of young people and working-class communities in the media, the logic of capitalist consumption and its fantasy of choice and freedom. I asked what she did; a buyer of luxury watches and her partner sitting opposite worked in the city. They were my train friends for the next few hours; companions whose lives seemed both intimately connected and worlds apart from the young people we had talked about at the conference that day, many of who were living riotously in the same “super-diverse” city.

That day at the conference I had talked to Teddy Nygh, director of [Riot from Wrong](#), a documentary made by a group of 14 young people in response to the 2011 riots that they saw unfolding and devastating their communities. Enthused by the stimulating conference, I arranged with a few others who were there to go the following week to see the documentary at West Green Learning Centre, back at my old stomping ground where I had worked for years with young people. I invited some old colleagues – youth workers, Connexions PA's and Team leaders – none of whom work in Tottenham anymore as they have now all come to form part of the 80% cut to youth and connexions services in Haringey. The documentary was followed by a lively, angry question and answer session with Teddy Nygh and some of the young people who made the documentary. This was a space for the local community to reflect and to organise, to recognise the loss and injustice that Mark Duggan's family and friends are experiencing and to acknowledge the creativity, talent and hard work of those at *Fully Focussed Productions* who have made this film and are continuing to work to get as many people as possible to watch the documentary and listen to their call for political change.

As well as working with young people and their families for an organisation that has survived the cuts, I am also a PhD student at The Open University. Sitting in West Green Learning Centre in Tottenham less than a week after the riots conference, I had a familiar bubble of anxiety about my PhD and that uncomfortable feeling that my research might not have anything to do with the 'real world' – with the young lives, the injustice, the passion, pain and violence that was documented at the conference, captured in the documentary film and powerfully enacted in *The Girls*. My PhD research sits within the fields of youth, gender and sexuality studies. It is an exploratory study looking at young peoples' understandings and experiences of 'good sex' and sexual 'pleasure'. The study is shaped by a body of feminist scholarship that has identified female sexual pleasure and desire as 'missing' from sex education policy, resources and practices and that calls for the inclusion of 'pleasure' into sexual health work with young people as a way of challenging unequal gender and sexual norms. My research aims to use the insights generated from young peoples' accounts of their sexual relationships and cultures to both speak back to these theoretical debates regarding young peoples gendered sexual practices, as well as contributing to debates about the way forward for sex education policy and teaching practices. My research has been part funded by [Brook](#), the young peoples' sexual health charity, and has involved ongoing collaboration with sex educators to develop training and resources to support practitioners to deliver this complex and challenging work.

I started my PhD in 2009 – before the last election, before the local youth service I was working in experienced 80% cuts, and at a time when I believed that the New Labour government just might make its commitment to statutory sex and relationships education in all schools a legislative reality. Times have changed. As

I watch the rise in anti-abortion protests and political rhetoric and read Simon Blake's (CEO at Brook) [blog](#) last week on his trip to the recent Conservative Party conference, I am reminded of the changing political, moral and policy climate in which I need to situate my thesis and make my recommendations about a way forward for research and practice in relation to young peoples' sexual lives, cultures and education.

The riots conference offered a space for documenting and examining current theoretical and political debates relating to young people and youth cultures in the contemporary moment. The conference showed how histories of events, individuals and communities can and are getting written and the role of research and spaces such as this conference, the screening at West Green learning centre and the play in Peckham Rye for intervening in these histories and creating opportunities for new forms of what Leah Bassel called creative forms of political listening. The conference offered a powerful critique of the suggestion by politicians and other public commentators in the wake of the riots that the riots were a series of apolitical expressions of criminality. Les Back characterised much of the public debate about the riots as 'a text book moral panic' and a 'festival of stupidity' with Theresa May MP and David Starkey given as two clear examples out of many of ignorance articulated with total confidence. As Les Back also cautioned however, it is too easy for us to poke fun at this ignorance, we need to think critically and sociologically about what was going on, and to focus, using Bauman's minefield analogy, on the minefield and not the explosion.

From the conference panellists, speakers and audience members there was a strong sense of anger about the simplistic and ideological representations of the riots in the media and the way that particular social groups of people living in Britain – young people, white people, black people, working class people, working class parents - had been talked about publically by politicians and by journalists. In this effort to practice '[public sociology](#)', speakers and attendees pulled these accounts apart and offered their alternatives. It felt like a collective cry of – we will not let you get away with telling that kind of story – the 'broken Britain' Charles Murray kind of story, as one participant remarked. As Clifford Stott pointed out– pathologising the riots is a powerful ideological discourse because it produces a particular solution – force, curfew and rubber bullets. Instead, Stott and several others argued, we need to look at the riots not as mindless or meaningless but as telling us something fundamental about the relationships in society.

The conference offered a space to document and share the stories and accounts of young people involved in the riots, the probation workers who handled the cases of those convicted in the wake of the riots, the mothers of those imprisoned as a result of the riots, Turkish shopkeepers involved in the riots, and the academics who watched their local communities on *YouTube* as they were looted, smashed and burned. Speakers and panellists emphasised the need to understand the riots in the context of ongoing tensions and inequalities – race

and class inequality, strained police community relations, welfare spending cuts and changes in the youth labour market. There was a strong message that issues of social justice and inequality must be at the forefront of the debate and discourse about the riots. The theoretical tools that were thrown into the discussion, the overview of current political, media and policy discourses and the commitment to putting 'real' people's emotional lives at the centre of these discourses provided me with a rich framework and toolkit to absorb, take away and attempt to speak to and consider how my research might engage with these debates and perform this kind of 'public sociology'.

Sarah Burton, PhD candidate, University of Glasgow:

Recently I had the pleasure of attending *Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The London Riots one year on*. The riots in August 2012 came just as I was preparing to begin my teacher training; I was fascinated by the reporting of the disturbance and violence as emanating from a disenfranchised, feral youth, unconnected to the society around them and wondered if I would see this in the teenagers I was about to embark on teaching. Throughout the course of the year I explored concepts of privilege and power with my pupils. Though my postgraduate research predominantly focuses on narratives of sexualities within the law and I was keen to combine my education background and current sociological perspective in order to explore further the narratives created around youth and misrule. Particularly interesting was the focus on riotous bodies and the idea of them as both dissonant and representative of specific groups or perceptions.

The day was extremely diverse in content and contributors. As well as thought-provoking parallel paper session which included work from Katie Blood drawing attention to the riots as a statement and Leah Bassell who built on the work of Les Back to bring forth original notions of a new form of listening which is both complex, humble and political, the conference also made space for non-academic participants. Especially interesting was the contribution of Teddy Nygh, the producer of the documentary, [Riot From Wrong](#), which investigates the causes of the riots and aims to show the unreported aspects of the rebellion and whilst framing it in terms of the voices of marginalised youth. These sessions, being extraordinarily varied, added greatly to my thinking, not only in terms of theoretical insights but also as excellent examples of how interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary research may complement perspectives and push forward new questions as a result.

The panel sessions were an example of this: featuring academic presenters as well as a wide-ranging selection of non-academic contributors such as journalist Owen Jones, Ojeaku Nwabuzo of the *Runnymede Trust* and playwright Gillian Slovo, they provided an exceptional platform for discussing the riots. I found particularly resonant Les Back's phrase 'poverty of imagination' to describe the

contemporary analysis of the riots as well as Cliff Stott's scrutiny of commentary on the riots which framed the rioters as alien others.

Yvette Taylor opened the conference by asking how we can go about practicing a 'public sociology' which doesn't reduce experiences and events to the realm of data, and ended by posing the question of how we can make sociology 'travel'. Coming to the event from an interdisciplinary perspective I found this significant; certainly in my own work on narratives of sex in the law I am encouraged to consider the ways in which my work may be – and *should* be – more than a straightforward piece of analysis, how it can engage with multiple voices and practices without viewing them from a purely theoretical perspective but also conversely how my research can travel, moving outwards from academia and finding its public 'voice'. *Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects* proved a genuinely inspiring event which is sure to have far-reaching effects.

David Maguire, DPhil Candidate, University of Oxford:

The working title for my research is: *Learning to Serve Time: troubling Spaces of Working Class Masculinity in the U.K.* It aims to explore, through the in-depth study of a group of young adult prisoners, the ways in which the construction of a particular version(s) of masculinity operate as a factor in the academic (under)achievement, economic marginalisation, subsequent incarceration and later disadvantage of this particular group of young adult men. This research area links to some of the main themes presented at the conference including gender, youth and education. The day was packed with interesting and stimulating presentations, and thought provoking panel discussions. I was encouraged that the conference organisers gave space to community organisations, postgraduate students and established academics.

A representative of one such community organisation was Teddy Nygh, the filmmaker and founder of 'Fully Focused Productions'; a media company that is organised and run by a steering group made up from young people. They presented a preview of their most recent film 'Riots from Wrong'. It was clear from the viewing that this film promises a snapshot of the riots through an alternative lens. Perhaps this is because they took to the streets with their cameras, only hours after the unrest started. These young filmmakers were much more in touch and much closer to the subjects and communities under the spotlight than some of the dominant voices coming from within mainstream media and academic institutions.

Following this was a thought-provoking panel discussion 'Reflections' which included a varied group of panellists, not only from within the academy but with voices from the voluntary sector and creative industries. A large part of the discussion focused on how race and ethnicity were a catalyst and significant undercurrent to the disturbances, at least in many of the locations of unrest, but

were in no way the only structural factor: class was also seen to have a significant role. Interestingly, a major theme throughout all the discussions was that there could not be one core causal explanation and that a myriad of interconnecting elements sparked the disturbances and, importantly, different communities took to the streets for different reasons. However, a recurring theme throughout the day was that there is a profound discontent with political purging of welfare and over and aggressive policing in some communities and this, in turn, generates profound resentment towards authority.

The afternoon papers I attended, broached questions not only relating to the media's representation/ reporting of the riots, but also the type of commentary coming from within the social sciences (where it could be argued that a funding climate seems to be setting the tone). One interesting position was that there was little to separate current academic representations of the August disturbances from that reported in the mainstream media. This raised interesting and well-trodden debates about the role of the social sciences/'knowledge' in challenging or reinforcing structures of inequality and political hegemony.

The closing panel discussion *'Futures'* touched upon how inadequate compulsory education provision, inadequate housing/ oversubscribed waiting lists, record youth unemployment, and a profound attack on welfare provision is creating a situation where many have even less to lose than they did a year ago. The endnote seemed to infer a warning that the time of mass disturbance is not yet over.

Abby Hardgrove, DPhil Student, University of Oxford:

I work as a post-graduate research associate on a research initiative focused on young men's experiences of unemployment in the UK during a time of austerity: ['Diaspora geographies and generations: spaces of civil engagement'](#). This is a collaborative research endeavour directed by Professor Linda McDowell and in collaboration with Dr. Esther Rootham. This research has particular relevance to gender and education as we look at gendered experiences of unemployed young men in the UK with specific interest in how their formal education and skills training map onto their structured experiences of precarious work and unemployment.

In listening to the work presented at the conference, I came away with two observations that are important for my work with young men, and (I think) for the work concerned with young people's involvement in the riots. One observation is empirical, the other theoretical. It struck me that much of what I heard in the sessions I attended represented a diverse and interesting mosaic of empirical inquiry into experience of the riots—the experience of those who participated and of those who watched and responded during and afterwards. Assembled together on the panel we get a sense of social dissonance,

disconnection and socio-economic inequality that informed the experience of Turkish shopkeepers or probation officers, for instance. Their disparate interpretations of the 2011 riots – both what caused them and how they unfolded as they did – give us some idea about the variety of perceptions people have regarding the young, the police, the ‘other.’

The empirical material I had a chance to hear provided a glance at the complexity of human experience wrapped up in the events of the riots last summer. These need to be taken beyond observation of social divisions, however. There were a number of repetitive themes that arose over the course of the day, and that mirrored results from the literature: the profiling of young men of colour sporting hoodies, for example, or the debunking (again) of misperceptions about groups of young people as ‘gangs.’ While such observations remain empirically accurate, there was little theoretical analysis that could describe or explain what was happening underneath experiences of bullying by police, for instance. I came away with some of the same questions Yvette Taylor outlined in the original call for papers. What is happening structurally or behaviourally to result in the kind of repeated stop and searches made on young people? How can we understand the difference between violence against the police and theft in community shops and businesses? However, this for example was discussed in the second panel discussion in relation to the neighbourhood and community context and their relationship with police, and particularly their past histories of police violence. These community histories helped to explain in part why, in some cases the riots were anti-police, whereas elsewhere, where the history of police violence was not at the forefront, the disorders tended more towards looting. Additional contributions from local organisers, elders and youth themselves may have added even more viewpoints. How can we think more critically and precisely about minority youth, their class relations, or their engagement or disengagement with the state?

As senseless as the looting and violence may have appeared on the nightly news, what was evident at this conferences was the volume of empirical material that has been gathered in the weeks and months following the riots of 2011. Taking into consideration both sets of panels, this conference contributed to the important task of taking forward these early observations and to draw from them a more critical and reflective interpretation of the causes, of the unfolding processes, experiences, and expression of the riots, and of the aftermath.