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# Youth unrest and riots in France and the UK

Hugues Lagrange compares the riots of August 2011 with those in France in 2005

In northern Europe, youth demonstrations and riots have recurred during the last three decades. During the late 2000s, social unrest spread mostly in southern European countries but also, more surprisingly, in the UK.

## France

During the 1960s and 1970s, educated youth in European societies were at the forefront of protests and demonstrations. In France and in Italy, educated youth were able, to a certain extent, to mobilize a segment of their uneducated peers under a Marxist discourse of common long-term interests. From the mid-eighties, immigrant youth were able to rally Leftist parties to their cause. This unity came to an end in the 1990s when Leftist parties, at the time in power, began to fear the reaction of the indigenous lower class. Immigrant youth were ignored, while the mainstream political parties were able to co-opt a portion of the Maghrebian elite. In the meantime, another cohort of North African immigrants' sons took over the streets and the suburban poor areas.

A large episode of social unrest took place in France in autumn 2005, and a smaller one in 2007. In 2005, for three weeks, more than 200 cities and 300 boroughs were a theatre of violence against the police; more than 10,000 cars burned. The participants of the riots were mainly youth of African ancestry; for the first time in recent French history, youth whose family came from Sahel Africa were overrepresented. Adolescents belonging to large families, living in areas where close to 50 per cent of the population is under 25 years-old, dominated the 2005 riots.

Economic segregation, more than unemployment itself, played an important role in France: the riots, even in provincial cities, were much more likely to occur where the segregation indices of immigrants were relatively high. The separation of communities on an ethno-cultural basis is very sharp in two-dozen cities in the Paris metropolis and several provincial cities and towns. But in many more places where segregation levels are lower, youth nevertheless feel resentful that they inhabit 'African' cities remote from wealthy 'European' centres.

Over the last 15 years, French high-school students have also participated in demonstrations and protest movements, but of a different nature. Worried about their future, the educated youth have been involved in a wide range of actions against underpaid work contracts. During these years, rioters in poor immigrant districts were treated with indifference by educated youth; conversely, unskilled youth living in suburban public housing estates stayed put when faced with the student demonstrations: they did not join them in the streets. Since 2000, many school dropouts, coming from the poor suburbs, have systematically entered the student demonstrations to beat the students when the demonstration ended, sometimes looting nearby shops.

In the context of the fragmentation of youth and violence, neither the wave of riots of the 1990s nor that of the 2000s has had any important institutional or political outlet. In 2005, rioters did not make explicit claims, they did not have banners expressing their wishes or requests, leaders and spokesmen were absent. They demanded implicitly protection and

consideration from the State, which did not come. After a short interest in elections issues, it became obvious that the voter turnout rates of young adults in poor urban districts would remain among the lowest. This political alienation did not contribute to any significant change in the political landscape. The divorce between the student movement and that of young people from the poor suburbs has become absolute, such that it is difficult to conceive of unified youth movements and protest actions in France. The split expresses evidence of deeper differences that lie at the root of socio-political divergences.

## Britain

In the UK, throughout the end of the twentieth century, many cultural protests, in which music and drug consumption played an important role, had also a political dimension. If, in the UK, it has always been difficult to cut across class barriers, interethnic fragmentation was not marked in the waves of riots in the 1980s. These riots had a strong immigrant component: unrest in Brixton, Manchester and Birmingham involved youth of different origins, but at that time, Asian and Caribbean youth usually fought together against the police. The deindustrialisation process had not yet begun; unions were still strong and able to bridge the divides between ethnic groups.

Waves of riots in the late 1990s and early 2000s in several Northern and Midlands cities revealed the effect of deindustrialisation in areas inhabited by immigrants of the New

Commonwealth. The clashes involved conflicts between immigrant youth of various ancestries which has been attributed to deep ethnic segregation and a conception of multiculturalism that leads each ethnic group to form a separate world. *The Cantle Report* (2006), strongly advocated a return to assimilation policies. In fact, this proved difficult, as we saw a few years later in Lozells, Birmingham. The economic forces underlying the 2005 Lozells riots seemed emblematic of a recurrent situation; in spite of an effort to improve intercommunity relations, ethnic tensions remained clear in the youth protests at the end of the decade.

In December 2010, British students organised large rallies against university fee hikes. By August, 2011, riots had broken-out in mixed districts in North East London and, to a lesser extent, in South London, and to major cities in the Midlands and North West of England. They led to a full week of riots, a great loss of property, and the death of five people; symptomatically three victims belonged to the Asian community. Black and White youth from working class backgrounds who demonstrated in the UK last summer were heavily involved in arson, looting and vandalism.

Apart from a few exceptional cases, young men of South Asian origin were not among the rioters. Economic unrest, buoyed by resentment toward the wealthy, but often targeting the underprivileged Asian immigrants, is conspicuous. Those who participated seemed to come in high proportion from families stricken with rising youth unemployment and the dismemberment of social programmes. The shops looted were not random; the most violent encounters involved Asian youth protecting their community shops, but 'looting' in Salford was in a predominantly White

neighbourhood, and there were indications of defensive vigilantism amongst the Far Right groups.

### Comparison

Despite important common points, these two countries show striking contrasts in the nature of their protests. In the UK, the rioters were not youth with direct African ancestry, nor Pakistani or Bangladeshi, but rather youth of Black Caribbean ancestry or native Britons from the lower rung of the social ladder, with disproportionately high unemployment rates. In the London metropolitan area and in the UK more generally, the 2011 riots did not take place in all poverty-stricken areas. The rioters were not youth of Muslim ancestry, but underclass young men from different backgrounds. In London, rioters lived close to the city centre in relatively disadvantaged areas surrounded by very wealthy boroughs (Butler and Hamnett, 2011), which seems to have been the case for riot areas in the Midlands. In the UK riots in 2011, as in the 1990s and 2000s, there was a split in terms of class and ethnicity; conspicuously, the sons of Asian immigrants were not at the forefront of the riots, but rather were more often targets, as they defended their recently acquired property.

In France, the 2005 riots were numerous in the capital region and in cities of the industrial east and southeast; like in the UK, poor uneducated youth from immigrant ancestry clashed with middle class youth. But there was little interethnic strife among minorities. In France, an overwhelming proportion of rioters came from the local French underclass or from families that had immigrated from North Africa and Sahel Africa. The rioters lived in public housing estates located in remote poor suburbs of big cities or in segregated towns. Even if Islam as such did not play a major role, the over-reaction of the rioters when a

teargas-can exploded along a mosque wall in November 2005 reveals that religion constitutes a hypersensitive point.

### Rich areas and observers

In the UK, areas involved in 2011 riots were poor but in close vicinity of rich areas and observers have suggested that a factor of intensification in the conflicts was the confrontation of opposite parts of the social spectrum. In France empirical evidence shows that social and ethnic segregation at a larger scale between old 'bourgeois centre' and remote peripheries has contributed to heighten the probability of unrest. In the UK, beyond the youth/senior divide, there is an unemployment gap between immigrants and nationals that varies geographically. In high immigration areas, the employment rate of non UK-born people is noticeably seven percentage points lower than in areas with low numbers of immigrants, where the gap between non UK-born and UK-born people is slight.

It seems that the 2011 incidents often took place in disadvantaged areas where non-UK born citizens have lower employment rates. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis of very modest ancestry have slightly better school achievement records on average than those of Caribbean and native British youth. The propensity of engaging in riots also seems to be linked to the prospects of the entire immigrant group; the prospect of South Asian immigrants differ in this respect from that of the Caribbean and British underclass. ■

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Employment data are from the Economic Affairs Committee (House of Lords) and local authorities: [www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase), 2011.

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