

Lifelong Learning and the Riots

John Field, School of Education, University of Stirling

john.field@stir.ac.uk

Working paper

16 August 2011

Rioting usually achieves nothing in itself, but it can tell us a lot about our society. And the responses can tell us even more about how we view our world. For anyone interested in adult learning, the experience of the public debate has been salutary, with any attempt to explain the events being dismissed as 'condoning' the looters. Darcus Howe, the veteran social commentator, was even accused of taking part himself, leading the BBC to issue a belated apology. Depressingly, in Britain we have been here before - and of course, we will face similar outbreaks again.

Riots in the early 1980s led the then Conservative government to reflect on the racial divisions and discrimination that fuelled inner city resentment. Shortly afterwards, one of the most violent industrial disputes of the late twentieth century broke out, this time among a largely white community, the workforce of the mining industry. The Thatcher Government's response to these events was complex, and extremely controversial. But we should remember that as well as law enforcement and other measures, it included a number of educational initiatives, notably including the REPLAN programme.

Funded by the government, and managed by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Further Education Unit, the programme supported innovative programmes of adult learning, aimed mainly at unemployed people. Like all such programmes, it had mixed results, but it certainly helped to stir up the then rather closed and complacent world of Britain's adult education system. All of a sudden, people were able to develop radical approaches to community based learning, often inspired by the ideas of Paolo Freire and the examples of Tom Lovett and other pioneers in community development, many of whom had tried and tested their ideas in the Community Development Projects of the mid-1970s (see Lovett 1975).

No doubt some older adult educators looked on sceptically, as we rediscovered old wheels and babbled enthusiastically about their radical potential. For those of us who took part, it was a rich, exciting and often inspirational experience, which helped transform the old world of adult education. As a relative youngster, I was involved in developing one REPLAN project, among the coalmining communities of South Yorkshire's Dearne Valley, which built on existing partnerships between Northern College and the Workers' Educational Association. Helped by a talented and thoughtful fieldworker, it evolved rapidly in the immediate aftermath of the miners' strike, building links with some very stigmatised and bruised communities, and learning quick and difficult lessons about language, place, and change.

While it would be arrogant to assume that we now know exactly 'what works' with the disenfranchised, disengaged and marginalised of today, it is just as bad to ignore the experiences of the past. Of course the 2011 riots were different from the events of the early eighties, and the context – political as well as social and economic - has also changed. While race appears to have played a role, it was not a simple one. Rather, this summer's events exposed sharp divisions between the generations, as well as reflecting the deep cultural gulf between the rioters and mainstream politics of all varieties from the radical right through to the ultra-left. Similarly marginal were the mainstream voices of morality – media pundits, churches, and civic leaders had next to nothing to say that could possibly relate to the lifeworlds of the young looters.

There are some obvious contrasts with the early 1980s. Whatever you might think about Arthur Scargill, and few kept their opinions on 'King Arthur' to themselves, the trade unions were a force to be reckoned with. Union membership was considerably larger, and covered a much wider spectrum of the workforce, than we see today. The Church of England also showed that it had greater independence and spirit than many of us had thought, producing a well-publicised and hard-hitting report on the values and practices of Christians in inner city areas. Highly controversial for attacking Thatcherism as socially divisive and morally dangerous, it also called on Church members to engage with the problems and challenges facing stigmatised urban communities.

And I do not remember that the working class in the 1980s was seen as an object of mockery. While there was racism (often savage and highly visible) in abundance, there was nothing like today's contempt for chavs or (the Scottish equivalent) Neds, let alone dismissed as the 'feral beasts' of newspaper headlines and bar room ravings.

As people with an interest in promoting learning, what can and should we do about this? We could do much worse than start by reminding ourselves of a very simple lesson from our everyday experiences with adult learners: adults young and old can learn, and change. The way that people are today is not how they must be for the rest of their days. The conditions in which people live, and which shape their values and attitudes today, do not have to stay as they are for ever. Against all the public scorn for working class culture and young people, we need openly to remind our fellow citizens that learning can help change lives.

We might also note that successive British governments have done little to challenge educational exclusion. Recently, the University and College Union listed the proportion of adults with no formal qualifications, broken down by parliamentary constituency (see UCU 2011). Birmingham had four

constituencies in the bottom twenty, while Wolverhampton had two and West Bromwich had one. And this after twenty years of policies designed to channel almost all adult education funding, in all parts of the UK, into the achievement of qualifications.

In the short term, the debate is bound to be dominated by short term concerns over law enforcement. But some political leaders, including the Prime Minister, have acknowledged that there is also a deeper agenda to pursue. This must include the future funding of learning for young adults. Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) were a modest success, not simply in attracting young people to college and encouraging them to stay the course, but also – and more importantly – in signalling that their future skills and qualifications matter to the rest of us. We all seem to have forgotten Sabates and Feinstein’s research on the early experience of EMAs, showing a fall in youth offending in those areas where the new allowances had been piloted (Sabates + Feinstein 2008).

It should be obvious to all of us what message is sent by the abolition of EMAs. Similarly, we can easily see how young people will understand the decision to slash funding for youth services. The London Borough of Haringey, to take just one example, is reducing its spending on youth services from £3m in 2010 to under £1m by next year. And if the Government really believes it can persuade people that the dramatic hike in the cost of getting a degree is justified, it should do so urgently. At present, young people are more likely to see it as yet one more way of making them pay for something that their parents’ generation enjoyed as a right.

Now, to exploit a cliché, let’s talk about sex. Bluntly, we have failed to look at the evidence on young men’s education. We have known for some time that men’s education is falling behind that of women. Let me be clear: I warmly welcome the removal of barriers to women’s participation in higher, further and adult education; I enjoy working in a higher education institution that values and promotes women; and I think that a society which recognises and uses the skills of both genders is likely to provide us all with better lives as a result. And yes, there were women looters too, though the vast majority were clearly male. But you don’t have to be a woman-hating pig to recognise something has gone badly wrong in the way that our education system treats some groups of men.

We can and should draw connections between this pattern in education and the ways in which these groups are over-represented among the most alienated and criminalised groups in our society. In the short term, we certainly need to campaign to protect prison education programmes from the cuts. But in the medium term we need to become much smarter about how we make lifelong learning more ‘male friendly’ in general and more relevant to disenfranchised males in particular. Golding’s work on learning and older men is a helpful pointer, but his has been a largely isolated voice (Golding 2011).

At a more local and rooted level, we also need to be much more vocal about the contribution of adult learning to economic and social regeneration. In the most stigmatised and marginalised communities, we must work with a wide range of agencies dealing with employment and social care, including social workers and youth workers, so that those who come into contact with other agencies can be carefully directed into appropriate learning programmes. Alex Meikle, chief executive of Rosemount Lifelong Learning in Glasgow, recently wrote persuasively about his organisation’s combined programme of social care, childcare and community learning (Meikle 2011).

In England, the new Adult and Community Learning Fund offers an opportunity to diversify and develop such initiatives.

This brings us to longer range debates, and the search for lasting solutions to the problems of our cities. Individual social mobility is important, if people are to believe that their world can be changed through learning. What do we expect people to think of our education system when, as the Sutton Trust has shown, five private schools send more young people to Oxbridge than 2000 lower-performing state schools? How can we turn to pupils in either set of schools and lecture them about responsibility and opportunity? And how can this situation exist after a decade of funding and activity for wider participation?

One reason, simply stated, is that we seem to have forgotten what it means to work in a public service. Far too many people saw the years of expanding public funding as a way of enriching their own quality of life. And it can be hard to argue against cuts in university funding when nearly seventy senior academics at Birmingham University are earning over £100,000 a year from their salary alone, while the Vice Chancellor trousered £392,000 last year. I single out Birmingham simply because it is in a city where three young men were murdered during the riots, and not because its academics include some exceptionally greedy individuals. We need a new ethic of public leadership which is civic and communitarian in its outlook, rather than modelling itself on a self-serving notion of private sector management.

Universities, like colleges and adult education centres, are a treasury of intellectual and social resources. Picture the workshops and teach-ins and artistic events, imagine how social scientists and economists and urban planning specialists might work with and for local communities, think about the dialogues between contesting parties held in unfamiliar and uncontested spaces. So here is a challenge to our great public institutions, from local community centres to Oxbridge: how can you contribute to an informed dialogue and a constructive debate, in which we collectively and individually learn our way out of crisis and confrontation?

Maybe things have simply gone too far. British culture often seems to be obsessed with celebrity trivia and permanent, throwaway consumption; the national elites – political, financial, journalistic – have lost their moral authority, tainted as they are with the filthy brush of corruption, irresponsibility and greed. Our labour market is increasingly polarised between flexible, high skill and mobile occupations on the one hand, and the low-skill, precarious and cheap jobs that have proliferated in the last two decades (see Ainley and Allen 2010 for an impassioned discussion). In these circumstances what is astonishing is not that there are riots; in our unequal and consumer-besotted society, what is more surprising is that there are decent people who will quietly work for the common good. And the challenge is how to rebuild, from top to bottom, a sense of community that will work in the new conditions of our post-modern, globalised and fast-changing world.

We need, as Bob Fryer argued so eloquently in his recent book (2010), to understand adult learning as a critical means of developing citizenship and belonging. There is a growing evidence base to underpin our case, and we should be willing to argue publicly and loudly for the importance of our work in a society that is visibly harming itself. Modesty, in a sector that is historically under-resourced and under-sung, is no virtue. The history of adult education – and of popular education

more generally - is a story of organising, advocating and campaigning. Basically, we have something to offer; we need to get out much more, and tell people about it.

References

Patrick Ainley and Martin Allen, *Lost Generation? New strategies for youth and education*, London: Continuum, 2010.

Bob Fryer, *Promises of Freedom: Citizenship, belonging and lifelong learning*, Leicester: NIACE, 2010

Barry Golding, 'Social, Local, and Situated: Recent Findings about the Effectiveness of Older Men's Informal Learning in Community Contexts', *Adult Education Quarterly*, 61(2), 103-20

Tom Lovett, *Adult Education, Community Development and the Working Class*, London: War Locke, 1975

Alex Meikle, 'Just why Glasgow fails to prosper', *Scotsman*, 11 August 2011

Ricardo Sabates and Leon Feinstein, 'Effects of government initiatives on youth crime', *Oxford Economic Papers*, 60(4), 462-83, 2008

UCU, 'New analysis highlights the great education divide across Britain', 2011, news release and tables available at <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5676&from=1676>