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### Flawed Consuming

An analysis of the riots of August 2011  
informed by the thought of  
Zygmunt Bauman

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## Flawed Consuming: An analysis of the riots of August 2011 informed by the thought of Zygmunt Bauman

The riots which erupted in England's major cities in the summer of 2011 were for many the becoming-real of urban nightmares. What started as a reaction to the shooting of Mark Duggan<sup>1</sup> descended into violence and looting which spread fire-like across the country. One would be hard-pressed to find a more exemplary 'moral panic', an episode more threatening "to societal values and interests" (Cohen, 2002: 1). As David Starkey's remarkable on-air meltdown on *Newsnight* (Starkey, 2011) aptly demonstrated, the country found itself in the grips of hysteria.

Whatever their political disposition, people were forced to admit that fundamental social problems underpinned the outbursts. For the political left this constituted poverty and inequality (Helm, 2011: 5). The political right, as emphasised by David Cameron's evocation of a "slow-motion moral collapse" (Wright, 2011: 1), saw it as further evidence of a 'moral decline'. This essay argues, however, that our consumer society binds these notions together. Is poverty, for instance, not a malignity that financially excludes subjects from a market which constantly bombards us with its messages and advertisements? Is 'moral decline' not inherent to the ultra-individualized society of consumers, promoting competition and lack of trust in other people as it does? Do, then, both analyses not fall under the larger rubric of consumer capitalism?

This is the view taken by Zygmunt Bauman. He stated that these were riots of "defective and disqualified consumers", explosions in "minefields laid out by social inequality". Whilst Bauman denies any prophetic ability (2009a: 2) to chart the minefield, this essay argues that his 'suspicions' (Ibid) regarding where the mines *might* be located were vindicated by the riots. Bauman's 'minefields' have been speculatively mapped in the "messages in bottles" (Davis, 2010) that he has set to sail into the sea of liquid modernity<sup>2</sup>.

The disturbances of the summer further emphasised the need to abandon the "distractions of the parties on the beach" (Davis, 2010) in favour of heeding the messages washing up on the shore. It is my intention to use Bauman's messages to question how the riots happened, why they took the form that they did, and to analyse the counter-productive public and political reaction to their occurrence.

**1** Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old black man, was shot dead because he was apparently "involved in a firefight with (police) officers" (Peck, 2011: 6). It later transpired that this wasn't true. It was "anger at the police's lack of contact with Mr Duggan's family that prompted 120 people to march from Tottenham's Broadwater Farm estate to the local police station, which became the starting point for the outbreak of social unrest that spread across London and then to other parts of the country over the next three nights" (Ibid).

**2** Bauman first coined this term in *Liquid Modernity* (2000a). As opposed to 'solid modernity', in the amorphous liquid-modern period, "the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the way of acting to consolidate into habits and routines" (2005: p. 1)



Along the way, I will consult the joint project of the LSE and The Guardian, 'Reading the Riots', which held that understanding of the disorder would "be obtained from the people who were responsible for it" (Lewis, 2011). This essay intends to connect the individual motives to Bauman's social thought. In particular, it casts the perpetrators as 'flawed consumers'. Bauman argues that "postmodern society engages its members primarily in their capacity as consumers" (2000a: 76). 'Flawed consumers', then, are those members of society "socially defined, and self-defined, first and foremost as blemished, defective, faulty and deficient – in other words, inadequate – consumers" (Bauman, 1998: 38). I will also use the work of other theorists, such as Slavoj Žižek and Paul Virilio, to support my argument.

## Consumerism and Adiaphorisation

Bauman introduced the concept of 'adiaphorisation', originally a term used to denote ecclesiastical indifference, to describe social action "neither good nor evil, measurable against technical...but not moral values" (1989: 215). In the solid-modern era, individuals were capable of evil because of the distance afforded to them by hierarchical structures of bureaucracy. Because of this distantiation, "the link between the carnage and totally innocent acts – like pulling a trigger, or switching on the electric current, or pressing a button on a computer keyboard – is likely to remain a purely theoretical notion" (*Ibid*: 25-6). Bureaucracy thus ensured that morality was equated to "the commandment to be a good, efficient and diligent expert and worker" (*Ibid*: 102). During the passage from 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity, however, "the consumer market took over...the task of adiaphorisation" (Bauman, 2009: 54). To paraphrase Bauman, we might say that morality now boils down to the commandment to be

a good, efficient and diligent shopper. The market ensures that:

all moral impulses can be unloaded and all ethical problems resolved, or at least simplified and made easy, with the help of the products of the biotechnical, bioengineering or pharmaceutical industries. 'Ethical tranquilization' comes in a package deal with a clear conscience and moral blindness (2006: 86).

To speak of translating "moral choices into acts of selecting the right commodities" (*Ibid*), one suggests that immoral acts are the outcome of wrong individual choices. As Bauman stipulates, "in a society of consumers, it is above all the inadequacy of the person as a consumer that leads to social degradation and 'internal exile'" (1998: 38). In this sense, the sound and fury of the summer was largely interpreted as the culmination of the individual actors' bad decisions. Even in rioting, wrong commodities were selected. In Clapham, a Waterstones bookshop was left untouched (Cohen, 2011) which served as ammunition for those seeking to confirm the perpetrators' utter lack of 'educational capital' and 'cultural pedigree' (Bourdieu, 1984: 63). As the notion of progress "has moved from a discourse of the shared improvement of life to a discourse of personal survival" (Bauman, 2011b: 24), freedom has taken the shape of a freedom to make the right choice. This, Mark Davis points out, "divides the new 'liquid modern' society of individuals into 'privileged' and 'unprivileged'" according to "access to those resources that invest the individual with a capacity to act within the consumer market itself" (2008: 93). Security is only guaranteed by a freedom to consume, a "freedom to choose" (Bauman, 1998: 31).



Today we are led to believe that:

security is disempowering, disabling, breeding the resented 'dependency' and altogether constraining the human agent's freedom. What is passed over in silence is that acrobatics and rope-walking without a safety net are an art few people can master and a recipe for disaster for all the rest. Take away security, and freedom is the first casualty

*(Bauman & Tester, 2001: 52)*

With forty-per-cent of adult rioters on benefits *(Walker, 2011: 24)*, welfare discourse shifted further from a "culture of citizens' rights to a culture of charity, humiliation and stigma" *(Bauman & Rovirosa-Madrado, 2010: 37)*. An e-petition stating that rioters should be deprived of their benefits was the first to obtain 100,000 signatures *(Elder, 2011: 14)*. An article by Neil O'Brien in The Daily Telegraph *(2011: 18)*, asserted that welfare should be 'conditional', a trend already seen emerging in stories of young people told to work unpaid or face losing Jobseeker's Allowance *(Malik, 2011)*. 'Dependence', Bauman states, "has become a dirty word: it refers to something which decent people should be ashamed of" *(2000b, 5)*. In our consumer society, the Levinasian "responsibility never contracted, inscribed in the face of an Other" *(Levinas, 1998: 58)*, is being eroded with increasing velocity. If freedom is indeed 'the first casualty' of a withering security, those unable to consume, the excluded, will be in danger of leading an 'unlived life', one of indignity and humiliation. As Evelin Lindner has observed, humiliation "is an assault we typically try to repulse and by which we feel enraged" *(2007: 6)* and can lead to destructive outbursts of violence. The riots thus rendered Erich Fromm's statement truer than ever:

"destructiveness is the outcome of unlived life" *(2001: 158)*.

The 'Reading the Riots' study identifies humiliation as a key factor in the rioters' participation. As Gary Younge observes, "85% said "policing" was an important or very important cause of the riots" *(2011)*. A 16-year-old boy in Birmingham described how the police referred to he and his friends as "'little shits and little bastards ... They're not what you see on the TV ... acting all good and that. They can be bad people. I hate them'" *(Prasad, 2011)*. Beneath this literal humiliating force, however, loomed a more destructive one. There was, said an 18-year-old man, a culture of "wanting stuff"; "It's because ... it's like, seen as if you're not wearing like, and you're poor, no one don't want to be your friend" *(Topping, 2011)*. This statement proves that the deeper humiliation is that which is experienced as a 'flawed consumer', the humiliation that stems from the deprivation of consumer freedom and the denial of access to the resources needed to make the right choices.

This implies that structures, rather than individuals encompassed by them, are really culpable. Here we can consider Žižek's model of violence. 'Subjective' violence, that which is "enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds", a list to which we can add the rioters and looters, diverts us "from the true locus of trouble" *(2008: 10)*. The 'trouble' lies in 'objective' forms of violence, namely 'systemic' violence, "inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism" *(2008: 14)* and 'symbolic' violence, "embodied in language and its forms" *(2008:1)*. 'Systemic' violence manifests itself in the inequality intrinsic to consumer capitalism by design. Its grounding in a Gramscian 'common sense' *(Jones, 2006: 53)* makes it invisible.



Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois argue along similar lines with their concept of 'structural' violence:

Structural violence is generally invisible because it is part of the routine grounds of everyday life and transformed into expressions of moral worth...the most violence acts (often) consist of conduct that is socially permitted, encouraged, or enjoined as a moral right or a duty. Most violence is not deviant behaviour, not disapproved of, but to the contrary is defined as virtuous action in the service of generally applauded conventional social, economic, and political norms (2004: 5).

Žižek's 'symbolic' violence is that which naturalises the 'systemic' violence. The media invariably play a vital role in this process. As Herman and McChesney argue, "the global media...helps sustain the political, economic and moral basis for marketing goods and for having a profit-driven social order" (1997: 10). Thus, they are directly complicit in this invisible violence. They are the main instigators of what Ulrich Beck has defined "the impossible task of finding biographical solutions to systemic contradictions" (2007: 685). They ensure that men and women become "solely responsible for the management of every aspect of their life-projects and so turn to the available solutions offered by the consumer market" (Davis, 2008: 7). It is relevant here to discuss to the 'symbolic' violence done to the rioters in their belonging to a 'feral underclass'. It must be said that the riots were not a beginning but a confirmation of their existence; the 'feral underclass' had always been known about but they only surfaced in ugly, isolated events<sup>3</sup>. Jon Henley rightly identified the "dehumanising" elements encoded in this representation, the danger of "comparing humans to animals" (2011: 2). If something is feral it implies a wild, uncontrollable state. When an animal is defined as feral, the idea of

culling is never far from the minds of those tasked with keeping the ecological environment in check. Embedded in the term 'feral', then, is an extreme symbolic violence. It also brings to mind Bauman's concept of modernity as a 'garden culture' (1989: 92; 1991: 27). He asserts that "modern culture is a garden culture... If garden design defines its weeds, there are weeds wherever there is a garden. And weeds are to be exterminated" (1989: 92). 'Feral' elements in a 'garden' create "chaos, 'the other of order'... a denial of all that the order tries to be" (1991: 7). In our era, 'flawed consumers' are cast as new 'weeds', creating chaos in the orderly garden of the "society of consumers" (2007: 52). Following Bourdieu and Wacquant's analysis of 'symbolic' violence - "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (2004: 272) - we can deduce that 'objective' violence begets 'subjective' violence. Perpetrators of 'subjective' violence are complicit in the violence done against them because 'symbolic' violence ensures that they fail to notice 'systemic' violence. Their violence is a self-fulfilling prophecy because they are told that they choose to be violent.

<sup>3</sup> These include the case in Edlington, in which two young brothers viciously tortured another pair of boys (Phillips, 2010), the disappearance of Shannon Matthews, whose mother had conspired in her 'kidnapping' (McDonagh, 2008: 46), and the tragedy of 'baby P', a 17-month-old boy who had beaten to death over a period of 8 months. I use these particular examples because they are emblematic of a larger trend embedded within reportages of the 'underclass'; the loss of childhood innocence, caused more-often-than-not by familial 'fecklessness' and societal decadence.





## Consumerism and Seduction

Complicity in 'symbolic' violence involves the process which Bourdieu and Wacquant call 'misrecognition'. It refers to "recognising a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such" (2004: 272). 'Recognition' is thus a set of "fundamental, pre-reflexive assumptions that social agents engage by the mere fact of taking the world for granted... because their mind is constructed according to cognitive principles that are issued out of the very structures of the world" (Ibid). The reason that the 'systemic' and 'symbolic' violence inherent to our consumer society go largely ignored is because our minds are constructed according to its very structures. The looting that characterised the unrest proved one thing above all – the ubiquitous seduction of the consumer market, even of those who are its 'collateral casualties', "dismissed as not important enough to justify the costs of their prevention" (Bauman, 2011a: 8). We all harbour, as Marcuse stated, the 'false need' "to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate" (1991: 7). Seduction, Bauman states, is "the paramount tool of integration (of the reproduction of domination) in a consumer society" (1991a: 97-98). It is testament to its power that the 'underclasses', those in but clearly not of society (Bauman, 2011a: 3), cling to and desire "the same joys of consumer life as other people boast to have earned" (Bauman, 1998: 78). These 'flawed consumers' want nothing more than to become 'free consumers' (Ibid: 76). The looting, then, represented for the 'flawed consumers' a warped, desperate attempt at assimilation into the ranks of the free. The rioters, Bauman postulates, were not attempting to 'change society' (2011c).

Their violence represented not a passage à l'acte, as Žižek might say, but a blind 'acting out' that left "the big Other"<sup>4</sup> undisturbed in its place" (2011: 326). The consuming we saw during the riots was a 'flawed consuming', but only in the sense that the goods were taken without being paid for during the shops' closing hours. The looting was largely conducted, however, using the very codes which the 'free consumers' are encouraged to use. As an 18-year-old from Lambeth, London stated: "It would have been like a normal shopping day...but with no staff in the shop" (Topping, 2011). Bauman asserts that "consumer society proclaims the impossibility of gratification and measures its progress by ever-rising demand" (2002: 184). Furthermore, fulfilment cannot wait; desire must be quenched instantly (Bauman, 2001a: 17). Was the crazed, illogical nihilism of the looting not dominated by these exact values? Interviewees for the 'Reading the Riots' project "talked about the pressure and "hunger" for the right brand names, the right goods: iPhones, BlackBerrys, laptops, clothing made by Gucci and Ralph Lauren" (Topping, 2011). A 15-year-old girl, when asked about the importance of having 'the right gear', stated that: "if you don't have it you're just going to look like an idiot. Like, that's how we see it, you just look like an idiot. It's a fashion thing (Ibid). Another girl from Lavender Hill said: "it was like Christmas; it was so weird". "Snatch and grab, get anything you want, anything you ever desired," said another, a 19-year-old man from Battersea" (Ibid).

<sup>4</sup> "The symbolic order, society's unwritten constitution" (Žižek, 2006: 8). In this case, the big Other is the impenetrable Doxa of consumer capitalism. It remains undisturbed in its place because of its pervasive seduction.



There are further similarities. Bauman contends that consumer society “puts a premium on competitive attitudes, while degrading collaboration and team work to the rank of temporary stratagems that need to be suspended or terminated the moment their benefits have been used up (2007a: 2-3). Working together to dismantle a shutter or smash through a shop-front were ‘temporary stratagems’ employed by the looters, ‘terminated the moment’ that entrance was gained and ‘snatch and grab’ individualism was enforced again. This, though, does not demonstrate the full extent of the togetherness. A 17-year-old who looted in Brixton said “‘You know it was the one time everyone was helping each other out. It had to be robbing Foot Locker!...I saw people from Brixton, different areas who would have literally hated each other but they was literally sticking together when they was going in there, like holding the doors for each other.’” (Newburn, Topping & Ferguson, 2011: 6).

Gang rivalries, immune to community projects, unity days and youth clubs, were put on hold: “one 15-year-old girl from Clapham Common said everything changed during the riots. “You know how you get gang rivalry? Everything stopped that night” (Ibid). Žižek notes that “the protesters, though underprivileged and de facto socially excluded, weren’t living on the edge of starvation” (2011a). ‘How could poverty be the reason for this?’ asked the political right. How are the looters poor if they can afford cars to load their swag into, BlackBerry mobile phones to mobilise themselves? To these I would reply with another question: does their desire to acquire more not point to the all-encompassing seduction of the market? Again, Bauman’s prescience was evidenced: “contrary to some scholarly accounts and popular beliefs, consumption (surely in its current form) is not about possessions, but about acquisition and quick disposal of the goods acquired so that the sire is cleared for the

next shopping expedition” (Bauman & Rojek, 2004: 298-299). Why wait to replace your ‘things’ (and they really do need replacing) when you can go to the high-street now, while stocks last, and take what you want? This question must have inspired each and every looter, It is, however, a question asked by the consumer market, of ‘free’ and ‘flawed’ consumers alike. If seduction is ‘the paramount tool of integration in a consumer society’ as Bauman tells us, it is also ‘the paramount tool of integration’ in looting. To seduce those who looted, all that was needed was evidence of seduction’s realisation elsewhere. Paul Virilio states that “the image loop has become the signature of contemporary disasters” (2005: 85).

In this case, the image loops of burning police cars and shops being ransacked, though signatures of disaster for appalled onlookers, became the call to arms for those who waged war on the police (Carter, 2011), and a call to consume for those who saw other ‘flawed consumers’ getting away with looting in cities around the country. Though downplayed by the ‘Reading the Riots’ project (Metcalfe & Taylor, 2011), the role of social media, and 24-hour-news was thus very important. The ‘real-time’ exposure of events exemplified Virilio’s ‘information bomb’ with its “metropolitan concentration and...dispersal of major risk” (2000: 12). The role of BlackBerry Messaging service was especially noted. A looter stated that “BlackBerry was enough to give me enough information, or tell me at the time, of what was going on, where to stay wary of and what sort of things were targeted” (Ball & Brown, 2011).

As a result, power was afforded to those a priori disempowered because they were able to conquer territory with greater speed than those trying to thwart them.



As Virilio says himself, “whoever controls the territory possesses it. Possession of territory is not primarily about laws and contracts, but first and foremost a matter of movement and circulation” (2000). Bauman characterises the consuming mass as a ‘swarm’ (2009: 16), a label even more apt for the ‘flawed consumers’ who over-ran the streets of cities in August. And *speed* is a defining attribute of the ‘swarm’.

## Mismeeting

Virilio views the city as “the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century” (2005: 90). He states that “the cosmopolis, the open city of the past, gives way to this claustropolis where foreclosure is intensified by exclusion of that stray, the outsider, what we might call a SOCIOCRUISER, who is threatening the metropolitan inhabitants peace of mind” (*Ibid*: 68). Virilio’s ‘sociocruiser’ could easily be a synonym for Bauman’s ‘stranger’, those “morally distant yet physically close” (1990: 24-25).

For Bauman, cities are “places where strangers meet, remain in each other’s proximity, and interact for a long time without stopping being strangers to each other” (2003: 5). The ‘strangers’ are undecideable and “undecidables expose the artifice, the fragility, the sham of the most vital of separations. They bring the outside into the inside and poison the comfort of order with the suspicion of chaos” (Bauman, 1991: 56). Bringing chaos into order, as aforementioned, is what the ‘flawed consumer’ does. Subsequently, cities, having previously been an escape from danger, have become the epicentre of it (Bauman, 2009: 65). To combat the fear produced, a coping mechanism had to be developed.

Bauman labels this mechanism the art of ‘mismatching’. He states that:

The art of mismatching, if mastered, would relegate the other into the background; the other would be no more than a blot on the backcloth against which the action is set. True, shifting the other to the background does not make him disappear. The background is undeniably there. One knows that, were this her wish, she would be able to bring it into focus at any time. And yet one sees no reason to do so. The background bears no impact on the course and the results of action except from providing its physical setting (1993: 154)

I stated above the adiphoric effects of consumerism. To repeat, “the collateral victim of the leap to the consumerist rendition of freedom is the Other as object of ethical responsibility and moral concern” (Bauman, 2009: 53). ‘Mismatching’ helps further erode this responsibility and concern. As Georg Simmel famously observed, the city makes us ‘blasé’ (1950), indifferent to what happens around us. Keith Tester has updated Simmel’s theory to the television age. He explains that “we watch and consume pictures or reports and perhaps feel that we ought to be moved by them; but in so far as we are also possessed of a quite blasé attitude in the face of the fleeting and transitory, we are not moved” (1998: 95). We practise the art of ‘mismatching’, then, when confronted with the plight of the ‘flawed consumer’ on our television screens and in our newspapers. As suggested earlier, being a ‘flawed consumer’ is an unlive life.





Destructiveness, to quote Fromm again, is the outcome of un-lived life. Destruction has been played out in the background, undeniably 'there' but not 'here', manifesting itself in inward forms of violence towards themselves and other 'flawed consumers'. It had existed in what Nick Davies has called the 'dark heart', "nestling within the country of the affluent but utterly different in its way of life" (1998: vii-viii).

The riots brought this 'dark heart' into focus. As a London-rioter said, it ""bought two worlds together for one day"" (Ferguson, 2011). The world of the background met the foreground. The rioters, hitherto 'relegated into the background', brought their destruction into ordinarily 'desocialized' social spaces (Bauman, 1993: 155). We were forced to confront the 'collateral damage' of our de-moralized consumer actions.

Our concern about them before they took to the streets was geographical rather than moral: 'their suffering is acceptable so long as they don't suffer anywhere where I can see them'. We can see this clearly in action in Morgan Matthew's remarkably compassionate<sup>5</sup> film about teenage violence, *Scenes from a Teenage Killing* (2011), which documents each case of death as a result of violence committed by teenagers. In one memorable scene, 'mismatching' was demonstrated with particular clarity. A street has been cordoned off following a fatal stabbing. The responses of the public to this news are shocking, not because they are callous and scornful, but because of the indifference displayed towards the reason of the street's closure. They are mere manifestations of a cultural indifference towards the suffering of the Other.

One woman politely asks when the street will re-open: "because I wanted to go and do my shopping while the weather's (nice)". Not all of those turned away are as civil. One man displays particular annoyance, forcefully telling the police officer

manning the barricade "I've got business to attend to, for Christ's sake!" The final visitor utters a paradigmatic representation of our 'blasé' attitude: "yeah I know someone got stabbed here to death, I don't really care to be honest. It's not me who got stabbed and no-one that I know. I feel sorry for them but I have to get home as well". These are the words of a veritable artist of 'mismatching'. With the riots occurring in the 'foreground', however, 'mismatching' could not be practised. One cannot be 'blasé' when the strangers divorce themselves from the 'background'. As such, a novel approach had to be taken towards the 'flawed consumers'. The country had to decide what to do with them, and how to punish them for the audacity shown in bringing their rage into our immediate proximity.

## Sentencing, or the Criminalisation of Poverty

Virilio speaks of an "*emotional synchronization of the hordes*" (2005: 50) and nowhere was this more prevalent than in discussions of what to do with the rioters. Unifying most of the discussions was the idea of harsh punishment. David Cameron said that it was time to take a 'zero tolerance' approach to crime, to "reclaim the streets" in a "war" on "rioters, looters and gangs" (Hennessy & d'Ancona, 2011: 1).

<sup>5</sup> I say 'compassionate' in the same sense as Keith Tester's interpretation of 'compassion' in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (2000 [1984]). Tester states: "compassion is an emotional extension of the individual into the world and into the situations of others, while sentimentality is a bringing of the world into the individual" (1997: 68)



This 'zero tolerance' approach reflected a larger trend identified by Loic Wacquant:

From New York, the doctrine of 'zero tolerance' as instrument of legitimization of the penal management of troublesome poverty, that is, visible poverty that causes disruptions and annoyance in public space and thus fosters a diffuse sentiment of insecurity, or even simply a nagging sense of unease and incongruity, has propagated itself across the globe with lightning speed. And with it has spread the military rhetoric of waging 'war' on crime and 'recapturing' public space, a rhetoric that assimilates (real or imaginary criminals, the homeless, vagrants and panhandlers, and other urban derelicts to foreign invaders – facilitating the conflation with immigration, which always pays off at the ballot box in countries swept by powerful xenophobic currents – in other words, with allochthonous elements that must imperatively be expurgated from the social body (2009: 19)

This approach, according to reports, has meant that the sentences handed down to the rioters were longer than those that the same crimes would have invited in ordinary contexts (Lewis, Ball & Taylor, 2011). Two rioters were handed a 4-year-sentence for inciting a phantom riot (Bowcott & Carter, 2011). The suspension of ordinary law represented that we had entered the realm of Giorgio Agamben's 'state of exception'<sup>6</sup> (2003). The 'Reading the Riots' project also demonstrates that three-quarters of convicted rioters had criminal records and "26% had served time in prison previously" (Travis & Bell, 2011). This, combined with the longer sentences issued, signals a shift from Foucault's prison-as-disciplinary-panopticon (1977) to what Bauman has labelled "factories of exclusion" (2000: 205). He states that

prisons "like so many other social institutions have moved from the task of recycling to that of waste disposal" (2004: 86). In the wake of the riots the offenders were deemed "'intrinsically evil and wicked' ... 'not like us'" (Ibid). We should, therefore, put them far away from our sphere of consideration, and for as long as possible. As discussed earlier, freedom is now dependent on resources. Social security has been attributed a pejorative meaning. Curiously, we see a simultaneous tendency towards individual security. As Bauman states, unable to protect us from the true root of our trouble, a politics bereft of power (Bauman, 2009: 108) must be seen to 'act tough' on perpetrators of crime. We seek, in other words:

substitute targets on which to unload the surplus existential fear that has been cut off from its natural outlet...those of us who can afford it fortify themselves against visible or invisible, present or anticipated, known or still unfamiliar, scattered yet ubiquitous dangers through detoxifying the insides of our bodies and our homes, locking ourselves behind walls, surrounding the approaches to our living quarters with TV cameras, hiring armed guards, driving armoured vehicles or taking martial arts classes (2006: 143)

<sup>6</sup> To paraphrase Agamben, one might say that the crackdown on 'flawed consumers' represents a 'legal civil war' that allows for the disposal of categories of citizens who, due to their lack of resources, 'cannot be integrated into the political system' (2003: 12), a political system which engages its subjects first and foremost as consumers.





The promise of personal safety has thus become “the major selling point in political manifestoes and electoral campaigns” (*Ibid: 145*). At the same time, personal safety has become “the major selling point in the marketing strategies of consumer commodities” (*Ibid*). Bauman states that “the consumer economy depends on the production of fear, and the consumers that need to be produced for fear-fighting products are fearful and frightened consumers” (*Ibid: 7*). If this is the case, can we not say that it was only a matter of time until the fear of the ‘flawed consumer’ came to justify itself?

## Feral underclass, feral elite?

Erich Fromm argues that it is possible for a society to be ‘sick’ (2002: 12). An individual may have a “socially patterned defect” but this defect “may have been raised to a virtue by his culture, and thus may give him an enhanced feeling of achievement” (*Ibid: 15*). Fromm quotes Spinoza:

if the greedy person thinks only of money and possessions, the ambitious one only of fame, one does not think of them as being insane, but only as annoying; generally one has contempt for them. But factually greediness, ambition and so forth are forms of insanity, although usually one does not think of them as ‘illness’ (*Ibid: 16*).

In our consumer society, greediness and ambition are ‘socially patterned’, and the latter is certainly a culturally promoted virtue. In this sense, we could call our society sick. When David Cameron called society sick, however, he meant something else entirely (*Shipman, 2011: 1*). Only certain ‘pockets’ of our society are sick, he said. Their sickness is the result of a ‘moral decline’. This is a curious notion, not only because it is so pointed. It is also inherently nostalgic; it implies that there was a point from

which ‘they’ began their descent, though this point is not made clear. It augurs, as Hannah Arendt stated, dark times: In dark times – and these times are dark, make no mistake – the temptation is “particularly strong, in the face of a seemingly unendurable reality, to shift from the world and its public space to an interior life, or else simply to ignore that world in favour of an imaginary world ‘as it ought to be’ or as it once upon a time had been” (1968: 18).

Bauman, following Neal Lawson, argued that the ‘feral underclass’ are a distorted mirror-image of a ‘feral elite’ (2011c). The differences between the elite and underclass, the ‘tourists’ and the ‘vagabonds’<sup>7</sup>, is their “degree of mobility – their freedom to choose where to be” (*Bauman, 1998a: 86*). The ‘degree of mobility’ afforded the elite represents Virilio’s previously discussed notion that movement and circulation are integral to power. As such, globalisation turns the business of the elites into “a genuine frontier, a virtual no-mans-land, free of all moral concerns and legal constraints and ready to be subordinated to the business’s own code of behaviour” (*Bauman, 2009: 74*). One of the great ironies of the summer riots was that some of the most popular loot (laptops, mobile phones) contains ‘coltan’ (Nest, 2011), a mineral, in effect, looted from places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the direct complicity of multinational

<sup>7</sup> The ‘tourists’ and ‘vagabonds’ metaphor deployed in Bauman’s discussion of globalization is a binary distinction in much the same way as that between the ‘free’ and the ‘flawed’ consumer. The ‘tourist’ is one whose mobility, determined by capital, affords them a power free of obligations (1998a: 9). The ‘vagabond’ is a traveller “refused the right” to turn into a tourist (*Ibid: 93*). They are rendered immobile; an immobility rendered “all the more humiliating for the obtrusive sight of the other’s freedom to move” (*Ibid: 23*)



corporations (Renton, Seddon & Zeilig, 2007; Bond, 2006). When rioters looted shops, wrecked livelihoods and burned homes in UK cities, the perpetrators were deemed 'feral'. When looting occurs on a larger, systematic scale, intrinsic to globalised consumer capitalism, fuelling terrible conflict and atrocity, it is conducted under the banners of *business* and *progress*<sup>8</sup>. Another irony is missed amidst the display of rancour towards the dependence-breeding welfare state. Following the financial crisis of 2008, Bauman stated that the rich created their own welfare state in order to rejuvenate the very system which caused the crash in the first place. This welfare state for the rich "unlike its namesake for the poor, has never had its rationality questioned, let alone put out of operations" (Bauman & Rovirosa-Madrado, 2010: 21). That taxpayers had to pay for the crisis, as Žižek stipulates, was a 'supreme irony': "'socializing' the banking system is acceptable when it serves to save capitalism. Socialism is bad – except when it serves to stabilize capitalism" (2009: 13). The dependents of the 'feral underclass', we are told, are 'spongers', 'feckless' and 'lazy'. The 'feral elite', however, conceal their dependence under the blanketing rhetoric of 'growth' and 'necessity'. We need to bail out the banks, they said; the entire economy, our way of life, *depends* on it.

## Relaying the minefield?

The political reaction has been one of containment. By handing down tough sentences and showing 'zero tolerance' the hope is to discourage a repetition of the scenes of the summer, to push the 'flawed consumers' back to the 'background' where they belong. If they take to the streets again, they could be met with water cannons, plastic bullets, and even live ammunition (Travis, 2011: 6). As ever, the politics of fear are evoked. And in this climate of fear, the market thrives. Are these measures, then, really clearing the minefields of consumerism and social inequality? Or are the detonated mines merely being replaced by reinforced ones which carry the same explosive potential?

<sup>8</sup> Here, the adiabatic aspect of our consumer actions is most manifest. In the solid-modern period, we were made unaware of the end-point of our actions by bureaucracy. In the liquid-modern period, we are made similarly unaware of the end-point of our purchasing decisions. We are ignorant of the possibility that the products that we buy have been part-produced under great suffering and that, by buying them, we could be protracting terrible conflict.





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*“I happen to believe that questions are hardly ever wrong; it is the answers that might be so. I also believe, though, that refraining from questioning is the worst answer of all”*

**Zygmunt Bauman**

Founded in September 2010 in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds, the Bauman Institute is an international research and teaching centre dedicated to analyzing major social change around the world at a time of social, economic and environmental crises.

Inspired by the sociological imagination of Leeds' Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Zygmunt Bauman, our primary aim is to conduct world-leading research and teaching in the areas of consumerism and money, power and ethics, new technologies, and social sustainability within what Bauman has termed the age of 'liquid modernity'.

We are also concerned with the on-going interpretation of Bauman's writing and the importance of his sociology for driving innovative ways of understanding and potentially transforming contemporary social life in order to create fairer and more sustainable societies for all.

Our research is committed to influencing key-opinion leaders inside and outside UK Government, in global business and the financial sector, in policy think tanks, NGOs and within civil society more widely.

We are also committed to offering inspiring research-led teaching for our students through postgraduate tuition and associated events that contribute to the already vibrant academic community here at Leeds.

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These publications by the Bauman Institute are intended to communicate our research and teaching output in an interesting and accessible format. The hope is that each Think Piece will help to stimulate debate in our main areas of interest, mindful of Professor Bauman's advice never to refrain from questioning the ostensibly unquestionable premises of our everyday life.



## Think Pieces

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