Public Readings of Urban Riots: Comparing the English Riots of 2011 to the Greek December of 2008

Abstract

Urban riots are political events. They question the very foundations of the institutional order and render visible the underlying conflicts of ritualized social life. Why then do urban riots continue to spark fierce public debate about whether they are meaningful protests or meaningless violence? This article essays some preliminary answers to these questions by comparing the English riots of August 2011 with the Greek December of 2008. The two cases are selected as most different cases because public readings of the riots differed so widely. The English riots were rejected as ‘meaningless violence’, whereas in the Greek case public surveys documented widespread acknowledgement of the riots as ‘social revolt’. The article tries to pin down the origins of these antithetical interpretations by delving into: 1) the behavioral and spatial pattern of rioting (especially the prevalence of ‘individualistic’ or ‘collectivist’ elements in the episodes of rioting) and 2) the rioters’ social and political identity.

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1. **Introduction**

Urban riots are political events. They render visible the underlying conflicts of ritualized social life by negating symbolic images of unity. During riots new, formerly disregarded subjects appear at the very center of the political stage by appropriating public spaces. Thus riots forcefully enter the political scene, generating strong reactions (repression, concessions, or both) from official political institutions. Why then do riots continue to spark fierce public debate about whether they are meaningful protests or meaningless violence? What factors influence perceptions of riots as either political contention or aimless agitation? In academic literature on urban riots differing interpretations of rioting are primarily attributed to the broader sociopolitical context, official and media framing, individuals’ attributes (e.g. their political predispositions) as well as social-psychological factors (Smith 2013, Snow/Vliegenthart/Corrigall-Brown 2007, Campbell/Chidester/Bell/Royer 2004, Jeffries/ Turner/Morris 1971, Buys/Bebeau 1971). While the reading of riots does depend on these multiple factors, this article addresses a different question: do public images of urban riots also depend on the attributes of riots? Like other forms of collective action, riots entail communicative aspects that influence public opinion.

Moreover urban riots may vary significantly. Numerous empirical cases illustrate that riots may possess similar but also disparate features. This article explores, therefore, whether there are specific attributes in a riot process that may influence its public reading as either political contention or aimless agitation. Accordingly, riots are treated in the analysis as an independent variable, while public opinion as a dependent one. In order to link public readings of urban riots to their attributes, two cases studies

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1 The concept of *riot* is a highly contested concept, often involving negative moral judgments. In spite of that, I use the concept of riot in order to differentiate between riots on the one hand and organized social movements on the other. This does not imply that riots in this article are perceived as irrational, unorganized or apolitical episodes of social disorder. It is clearly acknowledged at the beginning of this article that urban riots are political events.

2 For the communicative dynamics of collective action see S. Ganesh/C. Stohl (2014).
are selected: the English riots of August 2011 and the Greek December of 2008. The two cases present a strong contrast because public readings of the riots differed so widely. The English riots were mainly rejected as ‘meaningless violence’ whereas in the Greek case public surveys documented widespread acknowledgement of the riots as ‘social revolt’, even though the rioters’ grievances were more profound in the first case. On the basis of the two empirical examples the main argument of this article is that: 1) the prevalence of ‘individualistic’ or ‘collectivist’ elements in multiple episodes of rioting and 2) the social and political identity of rioters may influence public readings of urban riots. As the two cases illustrate, episodes of rioting that are perceived by the public as acts of individual profit-seeking are more easily dismissed as individual deviance or crime. Moreover, despite the fact that social marginality is linked to acute grievances, the low or marginal social status of rioters does not lead to public acknowledgement of the political nature of rioting.

The article proceeds as follows. First the inherent ambiguity of urban riots is presented and the discursive conflicts over the meaning of riots are elaborated. Then the two empirical case studies are introduced and their distinctive elements are highlighted. The following section analyzes the patterns of rioting and the rioters’ identity in the two empirical cases. The article concludes by summarizing the main arguments and presenting analytical questions for future academic research.

2. Discursive Conflicts over Riots

Urban riots are extremely difficult to decipher. Rioters defy their social status and challenge prevailing institutional norms by violating their socially constructed obligations vis-à-vis others. Hence rioting diverges from structured action, which “constitutes part of social order” and is “meaning given by virtue of [its] …place in the systemic whole” (Haugaard, 2015: 149). During riots organized and ritualized public life is disrupted and the properties of the institutional order are inverted. Thus urban riots lead to a “temporal interface”, a realm “betwixt and between” (Turner 1974: 73), where the rules and norms of organized public life cease to prevail. The ambiguity of riots is intensified by the fragmentary and episodic nature of collective action and the weak presence of clearly articulated claims. Therefore the purpose and meaning of rioting is usually inferred ex post facto by exploring the structural causes of riots; focusing on rioters’ justifications of their actions, or looking at the micro-
dynamics of the riot process. Hence, assigning structure and meaning to riots remains a highly controversial project.

Urban riots are followed by intense discursive conflicts over their causes and meaning. These conflicts mainly involve the acknowledgement or disqualification of riots as acts of protest. In the political contention over the meaning of riots two conflicting frames can usually be traced (Cavanagh/Dennis 2012, Budarick 2011, Lee 2007, Snow et. al. 2007, Campbell et. al. 2004, Turner 1969). In the first frame, urban riots are read as collective reactions to social injustices and the deprivation of rights. Whenever riots are framed in terms of ‘social injustice’ blame is usually attributed to the state and the broader socio-economic context. In this case rioters in general are perceived as new claim-making subjects who protest against existing grievances. The second frame portrays urban riots as meaningless violence or criminality. The emphasis shifts from the social context to individuals’ qualities and acts of violence. Riots become, therefore, historically and socially decontextualized. In this case the themes of ‘irrationality’, ‘deviance’ and the need to restore ‘law and order’ prevail. Framing riots in terms of ‘law and order’ shifts the blame from the broader context to rioters and their communities. Thus rioters are usually dismissed as immoral and delinquent individuals, while rioting is delegitimized as an act of political protest. Which frame finally prevails in this contention depends on the broader socio-cultural and political context as well as on media discourse (Polletta/Kai Ho 2009). Frames that resonate with existing value orientations, public beliefs and experiences are more effective in shaping public opinion (Gamson 1988, Snow/Benford 1988, Schemer et. al. 2012).

While scholars have long analyzed the impact of contextual and mediating factors (e.g. news coverage) on the interpretation of riots, the literature is short on linking the attributes of riots to their actual public readings. For instance, Buenor Hadjor clearly emphasizes that the public image that “prevails at any particular time has little or nothing to do with the specific details of the incident of urban unrest under examination. Instead, it is the broader climate in which the discussion takes place, the political mood of the moment” (Buenor Hadjor 1997:16). Thus Marx’s and Murphy’s analyses, specifying a series of attributes in a riot process that may enhance the reading of the riot as political protest, are rare exceptions. According to Marx “factors that make a protest definition more applicable are: the development of the disorders out of a prolonged community conflict and out of a focused context, an overlap in
roles between conventional political activists and riot participants, the presence of riot spokesmen, the presentation of demands, selectivity in attack” (Marx 1970: 27). Murphy in his comparative analysis of two episodes of civil unrest in France links the different public evaluations of these conflicts to factors like the presence or absence of “a familiar genre of contestation …references to past forms of acceptable protest, and plausible claims about safeguarding the general interest” (Murphy 2011: 1002). In order to analyze further the “…complicated relationship between the characteristics of events and the success of certain frames” (Gamson 1992:70) the next section presents the two empirical cases, highlighting their different characteristics and linking them to specific public readings. First the English riots of 2011 are analyzed, and then the Greek December of 2008 is presented.

3. The English riots of 2011

The English riots occurred following the onset of the global economic crisis, within a context of widening social inequality, cuts in welfare infrastructure and massive collective mobilizations. On Saturday 6 August 2011 a peaceful localized rally took place outside Tottenham police station in protest at the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan by Metropolitan Police officers. Approximately 200 people joined the demonstration, demanding clear answers concerning the episode that led to Duggan’s death (Waddington 2012). Three hours later public disorder broke out in Tottenham. Police riot officers who came to disperse the crowds came under severe attack (Home Office 2011). In the early hours of Sunday rioting and looting broke out in Wood Green and Tottenham Hale. On the following day (Sunday 7 August) violence broke out in multiple locations throughout London. On day three of the riots (Monday 8 August) the unrest spread to 22 of London’s 32 boroughs and to other urban areas across England (Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool). On Monday rioting reached its peak in London. The following day (Tuesday 9 August) rioting in London gradually abated, while in contrast multiple riots broke out in Reading, Milton Keynes, Leeds, Leicester, Salford and Manchester. Rioting continued in Bristol, Liverpool and Birmingham. On Wednesday (the fifth day), even though rioting persisted in

3 During the winter and early spring of 2010-2011 student protests against the government’s decision to raise the cap on annual student tuition fees took place across Britain (Ibrahim 2011).
Birmingham, Nottingham, Leicester and Merseyside, the spatial scale of rioting started to shrink. On the following days rioting dissipated and only isolated episodes occurred (Home Office 2011). The rioting in London lasted approximately five days, while in other urban areas the duration was shorter. Five people were killed during the riots. In the following twelve months, more than 3,100 individuals were charged for riot-related offenses (Lamble 2013).

The English riots of 2011 illustrate how a series of events may magnify social injustices embedded in social structures and collective memory, eventually leading to the outbreak of rioting. The fatal shooting of Mark Duggan took place in Tottenham, the site of the Broadwater Farm riots that broke out in 1985 following the death of an African-Caribbean woman during a police operation (Stone 2012). After the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan, the police issued an official report stating that Mark Duggan had been under police surveillance. The report suggested that when the police stopped the mini-cab in which Mark Duggan was travelling he shot and wounded a police officer. In fact the police officers killed Mark Duggan in a shoot-out. The next day some of the local and national news portrayed Mark Duggan as a criminal. His family, friends and community members found it hard to believe that Mark Duggan had started the shooting and demanded transparency and clarity from the police in regard to the exact facts of the shooting. Since the police remained unresponsive to their demands, they organized a protest outside Tottenham Police Station. One community member who participated in the protest and also remembered the riots in 1985 stated that the black community wanted to send a message to the police that unjust and poor treatment of blacks must end (Briggs 2012). The protestors who gathered in front of the police station demanded to meet with a senior police representative to get clear answers concerning the actual facts. Instead, a local chief inspector met the protestors, providing no further information about the shooting. The alleged violence of the police against a 16-year-old girl seemed to be the immediate flashpoint that led to the outbreak of rioting (Waddington 2012).

The English riots of 2011 generated a heated debate on their nature, their relation to previous episodes of rioting and, finally the lessons to be drawn from this new episode of large-scale disruption. Politicians and the media articulated an aggressively moralistic discourse. Rioters were portrayed as pure criminals or a feral underclass (Grover 2011). The riots were attributed to factors such as dysfunctional parents, single mothers, the strong presence of gangs, materialistic greed and moral decline.
The English riots were followed by extremely harsh punitive measures. Moreover, “the police undertook a series of aggressive dawn raids”, police and media encouraged the public to report suspected rioters and “several local councils issued eviction notices to tenants in social housing who had been charged with riot-related offences” (Lamble 2013: 579, 580). The state’s repressive response was made possible because riots were framed categorically as apolitical (e.g. pure criminality and greed) and measures were applied to social categories (e.g. poor neighborhoods, black communities, single parents) that were already stigmatized in the public discourse (Lamble 2013). Thus, the English riots “actually provided a political arena by which contemporary social divisions could be played out by using existing social feelings about particular groups” (Briggs 2015: 81).

The official narrative portrayed the August riots as “one rolling riot taking place across the nation” (Cavanagh/Dennis 2012: 376) and the rioters as a homogenous category. However, episodes of large-scale riots are extremely difficult to decipher due to the multiplicity of actors involved and the changing dynamic of rioting. Attacking the police may be in one incident of rioting an act of rage against the institutions of a racist society, while in another an act of resistance against state control. In both cases hatred for the police and revenge for the experience of police harassment are present. Thus in Hackney a young man shouted at riot police officers: “You know you all racist! You know it”. In London, on the other hand, a 21-year-old rioter underlined the power struggle between rioters and the police: “We had them [the police] under manners for once…We weren’t running from the police. They was the criminals today.” (Cavanagh/Dennis 2012: 380). According to Sumner the August riots “…had a temporal dimension, different phases on different nights, meaning that the original reasons for protesting were not necessarily the reasons for the second phase of riotous looting.”

Even though a major feature of urban riots is their fragmented nature, riots are not random. They are shaped by interaction among different actors. Furthermore, the

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5 Cited in Moxon (2011).
elements of organization and coordination are present in rioting. During the August riots, participants used extensively Blackberry Messenger (BBM) to update on their actions, to call on individuals to participate in planned rioting or looting and to pass on details of stolen goods that were on sale (Jefferson 2015). However, in the English riots organization and coordination existed primarily on a temporal scale.

In the academic literature on urban riots there is general agreement that their diverse contexts possess some common structural variables, such as unemployment, chronic poverty, income inequality, unequal consumer services, marginalization, moral deprivation, police-community tensions, racial discrimination, etc. (Jefferson 2015, King 2013, Waddington/ King 2009, Katz 2008). These factors were also present in the English riots of 2011. According to OECD data the level of income inequality in the United Kingdom has been well above the OECD average in the last three decades, while wealth inequality is even higher. The financial crisis further increased the concentration of wealth in the top segments of society. In regard to the riots, the analysis made by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), underlined that in almost all the areas where rioting took place the unemployment level of the 16-24 age group was higher than the national average. Moreover, in many of these areas youth unemployment was an enduring problem, predating the economic recession (Ben-Galim/Gottfried 2011). The joint study by the Guardian/LSE pointed out that 59% of rioters who were of working age and not in education were unemployed (Lewis et al. 2011). Similar patterns were traced in regard to educational attainment (Allen et al. 2011). The majority of people brought to court (two thirds) had some form of special education need. This was significantly higher than the national average (21%). In addition, during the period 2009-2010 more than one third of them had been excluded from school, while overall more than one in ten had been permanently excluded (Hedge/ MacKenzie 2015).

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One of the main findings of the Guardian and LSE joint study was that participants in rioting across the country cited ‘policing’ and ‘poverty’ as the two most significant causes of the riots (Lewis et al. 2011). In addition to the lack of money, jobs or opportunity, police violence and harassment, people interviewed in the former study referred to a multiplicity of other motives such as the increase in tuition fees, the changes to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), the closure of youth services, and the way they are generally treated in society. From the rioters’ discourse it is clear that besides enduring structural factors, short-term official policies also influence the probability of rioting, since they shape the direction toward which a society is heading. Accordingly, in the case of the August riots, for many young people government policies (such as the spending cuts made by the coalition government) portrayed a hopeless future, where marginalization would intensify (Allen et. al. 2011). In the English riots, marginalization was linked to feelings of hopelessness, but also to feelings of moral injustice, indignation and anger (Ray 2014). These feelings were intensified by the presence of social stereotypes that portray the economically deprived as ‘unworthy’ and ‘undeserving’ and by flagrant scandals (e.g. young people often cited MPs’ expenses and bankers’ bonuses) (Grover 2011, Tyler 2013).

One aspect of the August riots that generated fierce debate was the large scale of the looting. In the public discourse the extensive looting and prior criminal records of some rioters were cited as clear signs that the August riots were criminal acts. Even those who did not endorse this discourse portrayed the August riots as different from previous waves of rioting, which were mainly struggles against inequalities and racism (Wallace 2012). Thus they perceived the August riots as ‘shopping with violence’; “riots of defective and disqualified consumers” (Zizek 2011). According to this discourse, rioters who targeted retail stores and shopping malls aimed to elevate their social and material status. Thus individuation and the prevalence of consumerist values were projected as the cornerstone of the rioters’ identity. Looters, however, stated different motives for their actions, followed different patterns of behavior and

7 In 2000/2001 the police conducted 18,900 stop and searches. In 2009/2010 the number rose to 118,00 (Dzudzek/Müller 2013).

8 Since the early 2000s public attitudes towards poverty and welfare have been firmly shaped by ideas of individual deficiency and moral decline (Mooney 2009).
expressed different moral codes (Briggs 2012, Jefferey/Jackson 2012). In the riots of 2011 some looters clearly stated that they did it for the money, while others expressed their anger at existing inequalities and political institutions (Newburn 2011). For instance, Jamie explained her act of looting by arguing, “Basically, the government are stealing things all the time, so why can’t we steal from them. It is justice…There is no ‘we’ in the community” (Briggs 2012).

The question of whether rioters’ justifications’ do reflect a genuine moral rage against social injustice or are merely an ex post facto rationalisation of their actions has been posed several times in public debates over riots. Still, there is rarely a clear answer for all episodes of rioting. Useem underlines that “human complexity is not suspended when people pour onto the streets” (Useem 1998: 232). This complexity was also manifested in the English riots. One interviewee in the Guardian-LSE study stated: “The rioting. I was angry. The looting. I was excited” (King 2013: 33). However, the government and media narratives focussed exclusively on looting. Thus, rioters’ statements about experiencing unequal power relations in everyday life were either ignored or discredited (Nunes 2013).

The August riots, like other large-scale riots, brought to the foreground the existence of a severe democratic deficit at the national and local level. The young people participating in the August riots were detached from official political institutions and their local communities. They expressed their anger at politicians and dismissed engagement with formal politics as irrelevant (Haleem/de Silva 2012). According to Lewis only 51% of the rioters interviewed in the Guardian/LSE study felt part of British society (Trott 2013). The presence of a democratic deficit was most clearly reflected in the sharp contrast between the views of officials and rioters on the riots of August of 2011. In the official discourse the riots represented a threat from below, while in the rioters’ discourse, rioting was their answer to an existing threat from above (i.e. state authorities). The existence of a democratic deficit can also be traced in the major disruption of December 2008 in Greece. However, in the latter case there was a broader acknowledgement of the political nature of the events, due mainly to public dissatisfaction with formal politics, the participation of mainstream youth and the presence of collectivities that articulated a clear agenda.

4. The Greek December of 2008
The December civil unrest generated strong debate about the causes of the unrest and the protestors’ claims. However, no extensive social research and interviews were conducted either during or in the aftermath of the upheaval. Accordingly, the analysis of the December civil unrest is less based on empirical evidence than the analysis of the English riots of 2011.

The Greek December of 2008 occurred before the social consequences of the global financial crisis became clearly visible. Since the December civil unrest revealed a latent crisis before the full manifestation of the economic crisis, it was labeled “the crisis before ‘the crisis’” (Dalakoglou 2012:24). In contrast to the English riots of 2011, the social upheaval of 2008 was not preceded by a sequence of events leading eventually to the outbreak of civil violence. Rioting took place within few hours of the trigger event. Large-scale disruption lasted nearly three weeks and protests took place in multiple locations across the country. Looting was recorded on the third day and remained limited. The following short account of the time sequence presents the major mobilizations of the first six days.

On Saturday, 6 December 2008, two special police guards were involved in a verbal dispute with a group of young people in the Exarcheia district of central Athens. After the dispute, the special guards parked their patrol vehicle nearby and went back on foot to trace the youngsters. In Exarcheia the two special guards encountered a different group of young people. After a short verbal altercation, one of the guards fired three times toward the group, killing one of the youths (Kanellopoulos 2012). The victim, Alexis Grigoropoulos, was a 15-year-old school student. News of the shooting spread quickly (by text messages and online) to individuals, groups and networks in the anarchist and anti-authoritarian camp (Vradis 2009). Within a short time, protestors started gathering in and around Exarcheia. In less than three hours, barricades were erected around central streets and demonstrations were held in the center of the city. Protestors occupied universities in close proximity to Exarcheia (Iakovidou et al. 2010). Late that night, street fights took place between protestors and the police. Demonstrations also took place in Greece’s second largest city, Thessaloniki, escalating into violent conflicts between rioters and the police. Similar violent skirmishes were recorded in the cities of Patras, Alexandroupolis, Ioannina, Mitilene, Xanthi, Agrinio and in Crete (Kanellopoulos 2012). On the second day of the unrest (Sunday 7 December) a rally took place in the center of Athens. Demonstrators marched towards police headquarters. From the
outset of the rally, demonstrators started throwing gasoline bombs at the riot police. The police responded with excessive use of tear gas and the demonstrators dispersed. Throughout the day, violent clashes with the police were recorded in numerous locations across Athens. In Thessaloniki some 1,000 demonstrators marched on two police stations and occupied the buildings of the Law Association and the Theatre School. Demonstrations were held in various cities across the country, while violence broke out in Patras and on the island of Corfu. Monday 8 December (the third day of the unrest) the mobilization process reached its peak diffusion (Kotronaki/Seferiades 2012). On that Monday thousands of high school students joined the mobilizations. Pupils cut class and gathered in public squares. Many of them attacked police stations and clashed with the police. On Monday evening, following a massive demonstration in central Athens, violence broke out. Banks, cars, department stores, offices, hotels, bus stops, government buildings, and traffic lights were attacked or set on fire.

Demonstrations were recorded in around 20 cities across Greece. In many cities (e.g. Xanthi, Patras, Herakleion) students occupied university schools. Police stations were attacked in Piraeus, Corfu and Thessaloniki. On Tuesday, 9 December, school pupils and university students held demonstrations in the center of Athens. On the same day, following the funeral of Alexis Grigoropoulos, protestors had running battles with the police. In the cities of Patras and Larisa extreme right-wing groups attacked protestors and participated in counter-riots. On Wednesday, 10 December, several thousand people marched through Athens expressing their anger at the government. Protestors carried on demonstrating in cities throughout the country (for instance in Thessaloniki and Patras) (Johnston/Seferiades, 2012). On Thursday, 11 December, pupils besieged more than 20 police stations in Athens (Vradis 2009). Protestors also started to mobilize at the local level in order to establish neighborhood assemblies. In the following weeks, protestors engaged in diverse forms of mobilization such as sit-ins, rallies, neighborhood assemblies, strikes, squats in new buildings, temporary or longer

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occurrences of public and private buildings (e.g. a radio station, the building of the Greek General Confederation of Workers, city halls, a company specializing in opinion polls) (Sotiris 2010, Charitatou-Synodinou 2010). Demonstrations and occupations of schools and university buildings continued across the country. Since the beginning of the upheaval secondary pupils occupied over 800 schools (Douzinas 2010). The mobilizations lasted until the end of December. On Monday, 22 December, an incident took place that sparked new protest. Migrant worker and labor unionist Konstantina Kouneva was seriously injured in an acid attack. Two events in the final stage of the mobilizations foreshadowed the resurgence of guerilla warfare in Greece: the shooting by unknown gunmen at a riot police bus and the shooting and serious injury of a riot police officer guarding the culture ministry in central Athens.

The social unrest of 2008 was not another episode of large scale rioting in Greece (Douzinas 2010, Sotiris 2010). It was unprecedented in many respects. “The sheer speed, the momentum with which a conglomeration of disparate individuals and groups spontaneously came together …and acted in concert” was exceptional (Kalyvas 2010: 351). The political geography of the protests was also remarkable. In the past, violent conflicts between anarchists/anti-authoritarians and the police had disrupted public life in and around downtown Exarcheia, a district with many collectives, initiatives, alternative bookstores and free spaces associated with the anarchist and anti-authoritarian spectrum. In the Greek December, the killing of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos took place in the center of Exarcheia. Therefore it was no surprise that immediately after the shooting anarchists/anti-authoritarians activated existing social ties and succeeded in responding promptly to the trigger event. However, the distinctive element in the December unrest was that these initial mobilizations were followed by massive protest with diverse social actors transforming the scale and duration of the disruption. Thus mobilizations “…covered most of the national territory with rallies and riots sweeping rather evenly across Greece” (Kalyvas 2010: 352). Another remarkable element of the December unrest was the simultaneous presence of diverse repertoires of action (for instance violent direct action and traditional massive rallies) (Psimitis 2011). Thus rioting took place alongside the mobilization of organized groups (e.g. trade unions, student unions, parents’ associations) (Lountos 2012).

In the December social unrest, the more or less spontaneous initial mobilizations gradually evolved into more fixed and long-standing organizational
arrangements (Iakovidou et. al. 2010). The case of the Galaxy occupation is a vivid example. On 14 December 2008 in the district of Nea Smyrni in Athens the Galaxy building was occupied. The occupiers aimed to transform it into a political space to support and coordinate the current mobilizations. They held assemblies, organized public debates, created their own blog, distributed informational material and built (a short-lived) alliance with immigrants’ groups (Kampouri/Chatzopoulos 2009). Collectivities that created new organizational arrangements and articulated antisystemic viewpoints predominated in the leftist, anarchist/anti-authoritarian spectrum. However, many of the other participants in the riots established their own organizational structures, created blogs or published and distributed statements, pamphlets and manifestos. For instance, the group the ‘Albanian Immigrants Hub’ issued a manifesto, entitled ‘These Days are Ours Too’. According to the statement, “for us organized immigrants this is the second French November of 2005” (Kornetis 2010: 180).Thus a distinctive element of the December riots was the strong presence of organized collectivities and the gradual consolidation of new collective identities.

In the December unrest the social heterogeneity of the actors involved and their willingness to engage in violent confrontations was unprecedented. During the social upheaval, diverse actors mobilized, expressing their anger at the state, the political class, institutional syndicalism, the police, the mainstream media, the economic elites, etc. This anti-systemic protest brought together students, school children, the unemployed, the precariously employed, leftists, anarchists, anti-authoritarians, first- and second-generation immigrants, Roma youth and a range of other actors (e.g. football hooligans), who joined the mobilizations continually or sporadically (Vradis 2009). Hence economically marginalized actors participated in the protests alongside middle class youths. To a great extent, the large-scale mobilizations of 2008 crossed class boundaries. The cross-class dimension of the protest was strongly linked to the trigger event. In the shooting of December 2008 the victim was an upper-middle class pupil who was not involved in any form of violent political dissent. Thus the photo of Alexis Grigoropoulos, presenting as it did a familiar young face, showed that any teenager could become a victim of police violence. Both the younger generation and their parents ‘read’ the trigger event as a direct and personal violation of their fundamental rights. Accordingly, the December unrest was not exclusively the product of deprived or marginalized social groups (Papagiannides 2009). In this respect, the December unrest was dissimilar to other
major episodes of urban rioting, such as the French riots in 2005 and the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Another distinctive element of the unrest was the substantial participation of second-generation immigrants (Dalakoglou 2012). Most second-generation immigrants are young people, born in Greece, without citizenship and therefore vulnerable to police harassment and violence (Bratsis 2010). By participating actively in the December social upheaval, second-generation immigrants became clearly visible for the first time in the public domain as “citizens de facto, but not de jure” (Kalyvas 2010: 358).

Even though the December upheaval took Greek society by surprise, the prevailing sense before the upheaval was of a political and economic impasse and decay. The public had gradually become aware of the unfolding economic crisis. Limited employment prospects for the younger generation and low starting wages (expressed in the term ‘the 700-euro-generation’), increased precariousness in the labor market, downward mobility within the middle class, the high percentage of private debt to banks and finally the prospect of severe austerity measures all generated wide-spread feelings of insecurity. These feelings were coupled with public anger at the arbitrary practices of the Greek police force and its long-standing impunity. Since the 1980s eighteen dubious cases of deaths (especially of immigrants) had been attributed to the police (Karamichas 2009). However, public anger was directed mainly at formal politics. A high percentage of public opinion dismissed the government and the political parties as corrupt institutions, unwilling and unable to deal with the problems confronting Greek society (Karamichas 2009). In 2007 and 2008 two major events intensified public dissatisfaction with the government. In August and September 2007 more than 60 people died when the government failed to cope with the wildfires that broke out in southern Greece (Memos 2010). In 2008 the economic and political scandal of Vatopedi monastery erupted. It involved government officials and priests. This scandal was the latest episode in a series of recurrent political and economic scandals in Greek political life.

For the younger generation, feelings of political alienation were especially strong since the established two-party system was the historical outcome of social cleavages that had formed several decades ago. Following the restoration of democracy in 1974, the new party system was founded on a Right/Left cleavage. This cleavage expressed the political and social divisions that prevailed in Greek society following the end of the civil war. Thus young people felt excluded from political
institutions that reflected the interests, beliefs and life experiences of older generations. Even though the younger generation was distant from party politics, political parties were actually present in and shaping their lives. In their educational and professional lives young people faced the burden of wide-spread clientelist networks controlled by political parties. Greek society perceived young people’s rejection of political parties as a clear sign of their apolitical identity. Therefore the December social upheaval, which revealed a deep intergenerational divide, took Greek society by surprise.

During collective mobilizations “a multifaceted and complex subject” was gradually made (Psimitis, 2011: 117). This collective subject was the young generation that played a crucial role in transforming the initial violent clash between anarchists/anti-authoritarians and the police into a prolonged period of nationwide social unrest. Diverse groups of young people shared experiences of exclusion (subjective or objective) despite the fact that not all of them were actually deprived or marginalized groups. They established social ties, identified common opponents (primarily the police) and developed a common sense of purpose. Thus during collective mobilizations unity prevailed, even though the protestors’ social and political identities differed.

The December upheaval was not the outcome of an organized social movement using strategically disruptive collective action to attain its goals. Nor was the December disruption a representative case of urban riots. It provided common ground for organized collectivities and individuals to come together and form alliances. Thus, in the December unrest, links among various actors adopting confrontational repertoires of action were built and collective identities were molded, while new informal institutions emerged that have endured throughout the following years.  

5. Public Readings and Patterns of Rioting

11 “During the period of 2009-2011, more than thirty new political social centers, squats and local neighborhood assemblies” were established in the capital (Tsavdaroglou/Makrygianni 2013: 29).
The English riots of 2011 and the Greek December of 2008 were visible manifestations of social conflict. Still, the public reading of former unrest varied dramatically. Following the English riots, there were multiple surveys of public attitudes towards the riots. In the Guardian/ICM Poll (conducted 10-11 August 2011) high trust in the police (61%) was recorded, while 45% of the respondents blamed criminality on the part of the rioters as a possible cause of the riots. According to the Guardian/ICM Poll (conducted 19-21 August 2011) a majority of the public (70%) supported tougher sentencing for those involved in rioting, despite the extreme severity of the sentences already handed down. The R3 August Riots Poll, on the other hand, found that 47% of the respondents believed that debt and financial pressures contributed to rioting and looting (in the 18-24 age group the percentage was 71%). Among the findings of the eDigital Research “England Riots Survey-August 2011” was that an overwhelming majority of the public (94%) wanted people, who had committed petty offences such as theft or vandalism to do unpaid work in the community as part of their sentence. This finding was confirmed by Roberts’ and Hough’s research, which recorded a “high level of public tolerance for alternatives to custody” (Roberts/Hough 2013: 254). The research also confirmed the public’s belief in harsher sentences for offences committed during social disorder. In the Greek case, two public opinion surveys were conducted by Public Issue: the first during the social upheaval (December 2008) and the second a year later (December 2009). According to the first survey, 60% of the respondents perceived the unrest as a ‘social revolt’.

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36% held the opposite view. Public opinion was convinced that the unrest was a massive phenomenon (60% against 36%) and that it was not incited (47%). Damage and vandalism during the unrest were attributed to ‘few’ or ‘very few’ participants (42% and 26% respectively). In the second survey a significant shift was recorded. The belief that the unrest involved a minority, rather than the masses, had become dominant (51% against 45%). Still, the public continued to view the unrest as a ‘social revolt’ (52%) that was not incited (51%).

From the previous surveys it is clear that in the British case the public read the riots as a manifestation of apolitical and deviant behavior. In the Greek case, on the other hand, a high percentage acknowledged the political nature of the riots. These different readings were clearly related to dissimilar reactions from the government and the media in the two cases. Whereas in the British case rioters were demonized and the riots were condemned as pure criminality, in the Greek case the government’s response was more moderate, while media reaction ranged from puzzlement and bewilderment to sympathy (Kovras/Andronikidou 2012). Additional elements in the Greek case favored the reading of the riot as a social revolt such as widespread discontent in society, a long-standing political tradition of contentious repertoires, the substantive flow of information by protestors and the absence of human casualties during the riots. Apart from the contextual and mediating factors which clearly differed in the two cases, there were also marked differences concerning the behavioral and spatial pattern of rioting as well as protagonists’ social and political identities. These differences contributed further to the contrasting readings of the two riots.

5.1. ‘Collectivist’ vs. ‘Individualistic’ Riots

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18 Protestors conducted “an information war (armed with: Twitter, Athens.indymedia, Indy.gr, Flickr, Delicious, Friendfeed, You Tube, Facebook, Blogs and Wikimedia)” (Psimitis 2011: 128).
In the December unrest of 2008 there was a strong presence of collectivities articulating clear claims, while looting was limited. By contrast, in the English riots of 2011 there was a weak presence of organized collectivities and extensive looting took place. The two cases can be regarded as representative of two different patterns of rioting: ‘individualistic’ and ‘collectivist’. The distinction refers to public perceptions about the presence/absence either of collective bonds or acts of individual profit seeking in a riot process. Thus episodes of rioting that are perceived as acts of individual profit seeking (whether material or emotional (e.g. excitement)) are more easily dismissed as deviance. Rioting in this case is read as selfish, instrumental acts by individuals who disregard and violate collective interests. Conversely, if the public considers that during riots individual interests are subsumed under the goals of a broader collectivity; riots are more easily read as acts of protest. In this case the public is more willing to acknowledge the political nature of rioting, since the notion of the “political” presupposes the “willingness to transcend private interests in favor of their public reconstitution as “common” matters’”’ (Sandils 1992:85). Accordingly, whenever the public acknowledges the political nature of a riot, the riot becomes disentangled from the selfish interests of the individuals and is read as protest about common problems in need of address. In contrast to the notion of the political, “deviance and crime are seen principally in individual terms” (Turner 1969: 816). Thus, looting is an element that strongly shapes public opinion in favor of reading riots as ‘individualistic’. Even though looting may range from conscious acts of profit-making to violent manifestations of underlying conflict (for instance interethnic conflict, racial inequality, class inequality), it is usually read as evidence of rioters’ selfish and cynical motives (Dynes/Quarantelli 1968). Images of looting, therefore, strongly shape public opinion in favor of reading riots as ‘individualistic’. In the 2011 English riots the episodes of rioting were fragmented, there was a weak presence of collectivities and extensive looting took place. These elements favored their framing “as the work of individual subjects” (Nunes 2013: 569). Even commentators on the Left who read the riots as apolitical underlined the pervasive individualizing tendencies in contemporary consumerist societies. In the December civil unrest, on the contrary, the structured, organized action, the clear visibility of collective actors and the repertoires of the participants (e.g. public assemblies, public debates) favored its reading as ‘collectivist’. Accordingly, the public framed the December social
unrest as ‘social revolt’, acknowledging thereby its political nature. Both ‘individualistic’ and ‘collectivist’ elements are always present in riots. Even in cases of coordinated collective mobilizations, other actors usually join in to take personal advantage of the circumstances (Martin et al. 2009). Still, the degree of the salience of ‘individualistic’ or ‘collectivist’ elements may vary. A large episode of rioting may include multiple acts of political protest. However, if the prevailing behavioral pattern of a riot favors its reading as ‘individualistic’, the acts of protest will be ignored. If, however, the properties of a riot favor its reading as ‘collectivist’, the public will overlook individual acts of profit-seeking.

Besides the prevailing behavioral patterns in rioting, the spatial pattern of a riot may influence its reading as ‘collectivist’ or ‘individualistic’. In the Greek December of 2008 “violence was…highly symbolic and often very constrained within a broader repertoire of contention, including marches to police stations, sit-ins, general strikes, 800 school occupations” (Della Porta/Gbikpi 2012: 89). By contrast, the August 2011 riots were “decentered, disconnected and dispersed disturbances lacking entirely in concentration.” (Millington 2012). In this case, the element of protest became less dominant, since public attention shifted to multiple ‘sensational’ isolated incidents of violence. As M. Diani argues, “violent and disruptive events that are disconnected…are much more likely to be singled out as instances of deviance” (Diani 2012: 73).

5.2. Protagonists’ Social and Political Identity

Public evaluations of the political nature of social unrest are closely linked to public perceptions about who is entitled to be a political subject and who is not. Rioters are usually not engaged in formal politics or extra-institutional protest. Thus they appear to be new claim-making subjects. Their detachment from the everyday functioning of the political system (e.g. formal or contentious politics) complicates their classification into the traditional categories of public life (e.g. political/apolitical). Thus urban riots usually challenge our perceptions about politics, which derive from the organized and ritualized elements of political life. In the English riots of 2011, rioters clearly stated their detachment from official political institutions and their local communities. Furthermore, they dismissed engagement with formal politics as irrelevant. In the Greek case, on the other hand, many of the
participants had previously been actively involved in various forms of contentious politics (e.g. students, trade unions, anarchists/anti-authoritarians). Apart from having different political identities, participants in the two case studies also had different social identities. In the Greek December of 2008, middle-class youths participated alongside economically and socially marginalized actors. The social diversity of the protestors enhanced the reading of the unrest as a massive ‘social revolt’. In the English case, on the other hand, rioters stemmed predominantly from economically, socially and symbolically marginalized sections of society. Their grievances (for instance unemployment, income inequality, marginalization, moral deprivation) were more profound than in the Greek case. However, their low social status became a factor undermining the reading of their actions as protest. In government and media discourse the rioters’ low social status was projected as a clear indication of their individual deficiency and moral decline. Thus media rhetoric about a “mentally disturbed underclass”, “low-life yobbos” and “wild beasts” reproduced actively negative social stereotypes of already stigmatized groups.\(^{19}\) The behavior of participants in the riots was portrayed as a mere extension of their deviant and parasitic behavior before the riots. Hence, in the official discourse, rioters were simply incapable of becoming political subjects. Similar discourses were also recorded in the Greek case concerning immigrants who participated actively in the social unrest (Kalyvas 2010). The two case studies indicate that the protagonists’ identity plays a pivotal role in the public reading of riots. Grievances alone cannot account for the public acknowledgement of riots as a manifestation of political protest, and not as deviant behavior. It seems that public evaluations of the political nature of rioting are closely linked to public perceptions about who is entitled to be a political subject and who is not.

6. Conclusion

Urban riots are followed by intense discursive conflicts over their causes and meaning. These conflicts mainly involve the acknowledgement or disqualification of riots as acts of protest. Two conflicting frames can be traced in the political contention over the meaning of riots. In the first frame, riots are read as collective reactions to social injustices and the deprivation of rights. The second frame portrays

\(^{19}\) For media rhetoric in the English case see I. Dzudzek, M. Müller (2013).
riots as individual acts of violence or criminality. This article has presented two empirical cases of urban riots, where public readings of the riots were in sharp contrast. In the case of the English riots the public read the riots as multiple episodes of individual deviance and criminality. Thus for the public the riots did not qualify as political protest. By contrast, in the December civil unrest the public acknowledged the political nature of the riots. Therefore those riots were perceived as collective reactions against existing forms of material or symbolic exclusion. The different frames that prevailed in the two cases are linked to the broader contexts in which rioting broke out as well as to the specific attributes of the two social conflicts. Thus in the December civil unrest, factors that Marx and Murphy present in their analyses as favouring a protest definition were clearly present. Political activists participated in the riots, the attacks were predominantly selective, the riots included familiar patterns of contestation and even though the rioters made no claims about safeguarding the general interest, they clearly addressed the general public (e.g. numerous public assemblies and debates took place). Further exploring the relation between the appearances of riots and their public readings in the two case studies, this paper traces two additional factors that shaped public opinion: 1) the pattern of rioting and 2) the rioters’ social and political identity. As the two cases illustrate, if the behavioral and spatial pattern of rioting favors public readings of the riot as acts of individual profit-seeking, then the riot is more easily dismissed as individual deviance or crime. By contrast, the structured, organized and concerted collective action during rioting favors reading the riot as protest. Finally, in the British case, the rioters’ detachment from official or contentious politics and their low social status became factors undermining the public reading of their actions as protest. Thus the low or marginal social status of rioters does not account for the public acknowledgement of the political nature of rioting.

Synopsizing, riots are not uniform events. Factors accounting for different public readings of riots are not exclusively ‘external’ to the riots. Different manifestations of urban riots verify or negate established public perceptions’ of ‘deviance’ and ‘protest’. This analysis was limited to two case studies. Additional comparative analysis would enhance our understanding of how the readings of riots are affected by their appearances. This would contribute to a better understanding of a relationship that remains largely underexplored in the academic literature of urban riots.
Bibliography


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