

RECOGNIZING THE 2011 UNITED KINGDOM RIOTS AS  
POLITICAL PROTEST*A Theoretical Framework Based on Agency, Habitus and the Preconscious*

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*Drawing on the 2011 United Kingdom riots, this article explores contestation over the meaning of riots. Is rioting criminality and looting, or are there political aspects to the act? For those advocating a political element, there is difficulty in reconciling how an apparently spontaneous act can have political motivations. This article argues that rioting is a distinctly political action, and in order to understand it we must theorize the characteristics of agency that underpin the act. Drawing on Bourdieu's habitus, but developing it to include a preconscious component, the article develops a novel theoretical framework for understanding the rioter. Habitus is presented as a mechanism that can help better understand how experiences in the past affect the rioter's present, thereby leading to a coming to the surface of underlying political grievances.*

Keywords: rioting, agency, habitus, preconscious, Bourdieu

*Introduction*

In 2011, there was rioting in various United Kingdom cities, including in London and Birmingham. These occurred against a backdrop in which riots had taken place in 2005 (Birmingham), 2001 (Oldham, Burnley, Bradford) and 1981 (Tottenham, Brixton and Handsworth). Despite the relative frequency of riots in the United Kingdom, there is much contestation about what riots are and what motivates rioters to act in the way that they do. For some, most notably the media and politicians, rioters are bored youth who engage in opportunistic crime and violence (Clarke 2011) and, indeed, we know that, in the case of the United Kingdom riots of 2011, there was \$200 million worth of damage (Barentsen 2013) and 2,500 shops were looted (Treadwell *et al.* 2012; Barentsen 2013). For others, rioters are marginalized subjects whose actions are symptomatic of a post-political climate, where political solidarity and action are replaced with rampant consumerism (Treadwell *et al.* 2012; Fitzgibbon 2013). However, we also know that, of the 1,344 people who appeared before the courts following the 2011 riots, 78 per cent were on the Department of Work and Pension's National Benefits Database (Berman 2011). Further, these individuals were more likely to come from deprived areas, had below-average levels of education and higher-than-average levels of unemployment and free school meals (Berman 2011). Historically, rioting has largely been the preserve of such groups and often involves ethnic minorities, as can be seen in the 2011 United

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Kingdom riots (Birbalsingh 2011; Barentsen 2013). From this perspective, one might see rioting as a form of political protest in response to structural inequality.

Of course, for scholars who emphasize the political aspect of rioting, there are a number of issues, which make this thesis difficult to sustain. First, what are the rioters' motivations and grievances and, if they are not clearly articulated, how can we know of them? Second, how can an act that is largely spontaneous result from concrete grievances and demands? Third, how do you reconcile looting and criminality with legitimate protest? In this context, the literature arguing that there are political aspects to rioting has struggled to answer these questions and has reached an impasse, given it wants to argue that grievances are being expressed, but lacks the language or concepts to do so. In this article, I argue that rioting is a form of political protest and delineate a theoretical frame, which would help to address these questions. Specifically, I suggest that the rioter's political motivations and grievances are located in her *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977), with the riot representing a rupture of the habitus. Habitus is offered as a device for understanding how the agent's life experiences collect, reinforce and inform everyday practice in a seamlessly mundane and preconscious way. The key point here is that, because of the spontaneous and unorganized nature of these acts, and the fact that it is difficult, but not impossible, to change one's habitus, the potential of the riot may be unfulfilled. As such, I draw attention to the nascent political aspects of the riot, which are often obscured by a focus on criminality and looting, without denying that the latter play a role. My aim here is not to argue that all rioters are political actors, or to deny the negative impact of looting or criminality, but to show how there are spaces for politics in this act that deserve to be acknowledged. Recognizing rioting as political is important, because denying these political aspects risks obscuring and recognizing a form of action, which represents protest by individuals against structural inequality. I suggest that recognizing the politics of rioting depends on a re-conceptualization of: what 'the political' is; how agents engage in politics; and their reasons for rioting. These three questions form the key foci of this article.

Locating rioters within the particular social and structural spaces in which they operate represents an important advance in understanding rioting and implicitly draws on structure/agency debates (Keith 1993; Waddington 2010). However, the rioting literature has only superficially engaged with this literature and would benefit from a more in-depth analysis. In particular, the rioting literature has taken very little account of recent developments in the conceptualization of agency, which could enhance our understanding of the rioter. We can gain a better understanding of rioting, as politically motivated action, if we draw insights from Bourdieu's notion of habitus and, in particular, its preconscious aspects. This frame enables us to locate the rioter within the particular structural conditions they occupy and understand how action is informed and framed by this context. From this perspective, habitus helps us to explain how preconscious grievances stemming from the individual's life experiences, be they to do with experiences of social deprivation or antagonistic relations with the police, rise *to the surface* in the riot, in an apparently spontaneous manner.

This article is divided into four sections. I begin by discussing definitions of politics and political action, and outline an understanding of politics, which provides a backdrop to the interpretation of rioting defended in this article. Next, I turn to the extant literature on rioting, focusing particularly on accounts which highlight the agential and structural factors that inform the act, and identify the developments in, and

limitations of, this literature. Next, the article develops its theoretical frame for understanding rioters, based on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, whilst also making a case for its neglected preconscious element. The final section focuses on conceptualizing change in habitus, which provides a basis for understanding why and how underlying preconscious grievances emerge within the riot.

### *Defining the Political*

What does it mean to describe rioters as *political* actors and riots as *political* and, moreover, why is it important to do so? The starting point of this article is the contestation about what riots are and why rioters act in the way they do. Ascribing political identity to riots involves making certain claims about the rioters and the act that are clearly different than claims that the acts involve criminality or looting. Certainly, those who see criminality in these acts do not also see political behaviour. Further, we know that rioting is clearly different to taking part in a protest—a more recognizably political act. In order to understand rioting as political, we must first broaden our definition of politics and of the political. On this view, politics should not be confined to a narrow 'arena' definition of politics, which focuses on formal political actors, institutions or the state, but should be concerned with 'process' definitions, which are concerned with the '(uneven) distribution of power, wealth and resources', which may occur in a range of institutional and social environments (Hay 2002; 2007: 73; Leftwich 2004). This argument has often been made by feminists, who argue that the private domestic sphere should be recognized as political; here, power relations operate to create negative outcomes for women, such as domestic labour not being valued as work. More recently, we see this argument being made in relation to alternative forms of political participation, such as online mobilization or social movements, which attempt to broaden out definition of legitimate spaces for political action. As these examples illustrate, politics involves an uneven distribution of power, wealth and resources, which may, or may not, be (explicitly) contested, yet recognizing them as political suggests recognition of an inequality or demand. Let me expand.

On such a definition, the political is seen as an aspect, or moment, of the social, which may be articulated with other moments, such as the economic or the cultural (Hay 2007: 75). Westminster or formal political arenas are not excluded from such a definition, but the important point is recognition that politics has the potential to exist in all social relations. So, are all social relations political? This clearly cannot be the case, because this would make the political an empty concept. The social is political where there is '(uneven) distribution of power, wealth and resources' that does not occur in all social relations, but will in some, which can therefore be described as being political. The key issue here is to recognize the diversity within this non-formal space and I want to argue that it should also include rioting, which, of course, would perhaps be contested by others occupying this space.

An alternative view of framing the political and of understanding the riots is that presented by the post-political thesis. This thesis is theoretically sophisticated, drawing from the political theories of, most prominently, Mouffe (2005), Žižek (1999a; 1999b; 2011) and Rancière (1999), as well as being empirically rich and nuanced. This position is premised on a critique of the emergence in the post-Cold War period of a politics of

ideological consensus based on the acceptance of the capitalist market and the liberal state as the inevitable organizational foundations of society. Instead of aiming for consensus, Mouffe argues that democratic theorists and politicians should aim for the creation of a vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation ‘where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted’ (2005: 3). On this view, a consensual approach, instead of creating the conditions for a reconciled society, leads to the emergence of antagonisms that an agonistic perspective, by providing those conflicts with legitimate forms of expression, would have managed to avoid. This inherent antagonism is considered to be constitutive of the political. Proper politics, from this perspective, is seen as the institution of radical, active equality, whilst politics today, on the other hand, is *post-political* because it is reduced to social administration, a ‘politics of self’ and a new ‘politics of conduct’, that forecloses the possibility for truly political praxes to emerge.

From such a perspective, the riots of 2011 exhibit ‘post-political’ tendencies, in the sense that, while there may be aspects of resistance, it is subsumed under an overarching ideological framework of neo-liberalism, from which individuals are unable to develop sustained forms of critique or ‘resistance’. For Treadwell *et al.* (2012), the riots exhibit post-political tendencies and, therefore, cannot be political because ‘There is a total absence of an alternative culture with anything like the same allure that might reanimate political being and recruit it to the cause of social justice’ (2012: 8).

Treadwell *et al.* recognize that a political moment was present in the initial trigger event, the shooting of Mark Duggan in the United Kingdom riots of 2011, but this is seen to dissolve quickly as the riots progress into looting and acts of consumerism—acts which reflect the rioter’s absorption into neo-liberal ideology. However, in viewing contemporary forms of protest specifically as *post-political*, the concept of post-politics arguably serves to blunt, rather than sharpen, our capacity to critically interrogate contemporary forms of protest, and their relationship to inequality. Moreover, the concept of post-politics provides an unnecessarily traditionalist and unrealistic account of what constitutes ‘political action’, as well as a monolithic account of ‘neo-liberalism’. In what follows, I show that rioting can be better characterized as an emergent form of politics that contests inequalities in a way which cannot usefully be explained under the banner of ‘neo-liberalism’. The concept of post-politics, then, ultimately obscures, rather than helps, our understanding of emergent forms of protest.

As the discussion thus far shows, one’s conception of politics and the political frames how one understands rioting. Operating with a broader definition of political action enables us to recognize the ‘(uneven) distribution of power, wealth and resources’ which characterized the rioters’ lives, and thereby gave them cause to riot. In the next section, I consider how the extant literature has theorized riots and rioters and identify some broad trends and some recurrent problems in this literature, which could be addressed through a greater engagement with the concept of agency.

### *Rioting: Criminal, Political or Post-Political Act?*

Rioting has variously been understood as: criminal behaviour by bored and inactive youth (Jahoda 1982); community insurrections (Gilroy 1987/1992); and the power of the crowd mind (Le Bon 1968/1897; Tarde 1903/2011). Accounts of rioting also differ in terms of the emphasis they place on spontaneity, irrationality, political motivations,

violence and criminality—factors which presuppose particular conceptions of agency. For those who argue that rioting is spontaneous, but includes political motivations, there is a significant problem in explaining how these agential capacities co-exist in riots. The lack of organization in riots also serves to depoliticize the act.

The existing accounts of rioting have mainly developed in response to actual riots and, therefore, developed chronologically following new riots (Gilroy 1987/1992; Keith 1993; Bagguley and Hussain 2008), and through official reports (Kerner Report 1968/1988; Scarman 1981; Cantle 2001). There have also been attempts to develop a broader framework (Smelser 1962; Waddington 2010). There have been important shifts in this latter literature, most notably a move away from explanations of rioting in terms of a ‘crowd mind’ towards ones which acknowledge the importance of context and the political grievances of rioters. This section of the article identifies some conceptual distinctions in the literature on rioting, highlighting how, at various points, it has been overly structuralist and too focused on attributing *causal* blame. The more recent literature recognizes the importance of focusing on individuals and their heterogeneity in the crowd; however, it fails to theorize agency—a move which could significantly help us understand this complex action.

The early literature on rioting draws on social psychology and explains rioting through reference to crowd psychology (Le Bon 1968/1897; Tarde 1903/2011; Reicher 2001; Drury and Stott 2011). According to this position, individuals in the crowd develop group characteristics, which act as a mechanism for collective violence. This approach has been heavily criticized for reifying and essentializing the crowd and for ignoring the heterogeneity and complexity of individuals involved in rioting (Keith 1993; Bagguley and Hussain 2008). Borch’s (2005; 2006) article on the 2005 riots in France and the work of Toews (2003), Reicher (2001) and Drury and Stott (2011) offer recent defences of this position. Essentially, this approach is problematic at both an analytical and a normative level, because it fails to explain the actions of individuals involved and privileges the accounts of the powerful, be they politicians or journalists, who often perpetuate the discourse about a riotous crowd (Bagguley and Hussain 2008). Whilst the crowd, as a collective object, may have some effect on individuals, it is important to recognize that crowds are made up of individuals and ‘the crowd’ does not have unique characteristics of its own.

In Rude’s (1981) work, we see a historian’s attempt to add ‘faces to the crowd’ through an examination of the historical context and the actual participants in the riot. Documenting the demography of the crowd, its social origins, ages, occupations and politics (considering who, or what, they are attacking as indicators of political motivations), are considered important in this approach. Rude also notes the response of the police and focuses upon who was active and who passive in the riot. This approach is generally recognized as an important development in the literature, as it goes some way to restoring agency, heterogeneity and complexity to the crowd. Indeed, Bagguley and Hussain (2008) are heavily dependent upon Rude in their study of the Bradford riots of 2001. Rude brings the issue of agency and context to the fore and, although his description of agency is largely descriptive, it succeeds in adding faces, where before there was only a crowd.

Waddington’s multivariate analysis is based on his Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder, which attaches great importance to the highly emotive ‘flashpoint’ incidents or events that serve as immediate catalysts for wider disorder (Waddington 2008; 2010).



This approach also highlights the importance of six other levels of analysis: structural; cultural; political/ideological; contextual; situational; and interactional. In his more recent work, Waddington (2010) has also highlighted the institutional/organizational setting within which riots occur as an important seventh factor in the analysis of riots. Keith (1993) welcomes contextualizing descriptive typologies, such as Waddington's, but warns against the dangers of reification of disorders as diverse as football hooliganism, industrial strife and civil unrest and the neglect of the 'complexity of individual intentions' in this approach (Keith 1993: 81)—a point which is also echoed by Bagguley and Hussain (2008). Waddington's typology is important in terms of identifying the context of the riot; however, as Keith argues, this account would benefit from paying more attention to the individuals involved.

Keith's work on the 1981 riots goes the furthest in developing an account of agency, which acknowledges the role of social structures. His approach emphasizes the importance of the *trigger* incident in the context of wider social relations. Keith is highly critical of a 'recipe mode of analysis' of riots, which, in a Humean fashion, attempts to identify different causal elements in the riot, in order to apportion blame. This approach can be seen in all of the official reports following the riots: Kerner Report (1968/1988), Scarman (1981) and Cantle (2001). Keith highlights the importance of the spaces in which riots take place and how the triggering events resound with symbolic and historical significance, when considered in relation to the histories and relations between the communities and police in the spaces where the riots occur.

A further compelling account of the riots, which many have turned to in the context of recent riots in the United Kingdom in 2011, is that put forward by advocates of the post-political thesis (Bauman 2011; Moxon 2011; Žižek 2011; Treadwell *et al.* 2012), which was introduced earlier in the article. According to Treadwell *et al.* (2012), the rioters in the United Kingdom's 2011 riots exist in a post-political world where there is no longer any discernable political project and, in such a scenario, rioters, much like other 'dissatisfied subjects', 'had nowhere to go but the shops' (Treadwell *et al.* 2012: 1). For Moxon (2011), rather than signalling any breakdown in the norms of society, the United Kingdom riots of 2011 reflect conformity to the underlying values of consumer culture. This literature recognizes the impact of broader social structural factors, such as unemployment, racism and marginalization that affect the rioters' lives. However, the thesis here is that, in the context of a neo-liberal ideology where consumerism dominates, it is a culture of excessive and selfish consumerist ideology which provides the dominant motivation for rioters.

Treadwell *et al.*'s (2012) account provides an explanation of why riots end the way they do—namely in looting and criminality. One issue with this account, however, is that all rioters are tarred with the same brush, so everyone is denied political efficacy and there is no account of variations in actors' motivations for rioting. Further, whilst this perspective does acknowledge the small act of resistance that is present in the riot at the trigger stage, which, in the case of the 2011 United Kingdom riots, involved protest against the shooting of Mark Duggan, it fails to explore or understand the reasons why this trigger event does not lead to further protest. Instead, the focus, from this perspective, is only on the looting and criminality that also characterize this act. Through a discussion of habitus and how it operates, I show that the riot, at the trigger stage and beyond, represents a protest by individuals, although this may be unfulfilled and the act may end in looting or criminality. Such a view requires recognition that rioters,

and the conditions of their domination, are deeply embedded and difficult to change, because it involves challenging a highly connected inter-web of inequality and domination. This is not matter of saying that rioters do not have any agency or power to change their lives; rather, in Bourdieu's terms, it is a question of arguing that it is very difficult to do so.

Grievances relating to poverty, exclusion and structural inequality are acknowledged in some of the literature on rioting (Keith 1993; Waddington 2008; 2010). However, the accounts often struggle to link these to political motivations for rioting, or to explain why riots end in criminality or the loss and obscuring of the trigger issues which initiate the riot. Of course, responsibility for this could lie with the media, the police or the state, or, perhaps, as social scientists we lack the language or the concepts to better understand and explain this action.

In the work of Rude (1981), Keith (1993) and Bagguley and Hussain (2008), we see a clear move towards focusing on individual rioters and their motivations. This move towards agency is certainly to be welcomed. However, it runs into difficulties because it stops short of developing an understanding of agency at the level of ontology and thinking about the unique characteristics of agency which may help us to better understand how grievances and motivations operate. The other notable trend in the literature on rioting is towards recognition of the importance of context or structure, which is emphasized, in particular, by Waddington (2010) and Keith (1993). This is also an important observation, and the remainder of the article builds on both of these developments to offer an interpretation of rioting, which brings together a contextual and an agency-based approach. However, before I do this, I discuss the concepts of 'motivation' and 'grievance', which will inform the discussion of habitus later in the paper.

### *The Search for Political Motivations and Grievances*

It is difficult to deny that grievances, about social deprivation, limited employment opportunities, racism and segregation, and the political motivations associated with them, are of concern to rioters. This is particularly so given that the riots considered here have occurred in areas with large ethnic minority populations, disproportionately affected by socio-economic inequalities (Keith 1993; Amin 2002; Tilly 2003; Bagguley and Hussain 2008; Waddington 2010;). However, if we accept that rioters are politically motivated, the central dilemma in explaining rioting is the tension between the spontaneity of the act and the lack of an explicit political strategy expressed by those involved, given that an articulated political strategy usually involves considered and organized actions (Akram 2009).

Gilroy suggests that rioting should be seen as a 'long term strategic war of position'. However, he fails to explain how 'long-term strategies' combine with spontaneous actions (Gilroy 1987/1992: 233). In a similar vein, Keith (1993) argues that, unless we can address the impromptu nature of rioting, we cannot account theoretically for what occurs during a riot. As such, in response to accounts which privilege the irrationality of rioters, Keith describes rioting as 'spontaneous rationality' and distinguishes the riot from 'self-conscious deliberate strategy' (Keith 1993: 185). Unfortunately, his approach reaches an impasse, because he argues that there is 'seemingly irreconcilable mix of violence, looting and strategy' (Keith 1993: 186). Despite these attempts to explain and

link rioters' grievances to political motivations, such accounts ultimately struggle to make the link between grievances and political motivations—clearly the crucial issue.

Identifying political motivations for riots is a complex task, given that much of the literature describes rioters as *irrational* (Jahoda 1982: 96–7), whilst those who attribute rationality to the rioters struggle with the apparent spontaneity of the riot (Keith 1993; Horowitz 2003; Waddington 2010). The focus on rationality in this discussion is telling, because it points to the way in which Political Science legitimates forms of political behaviour, given that rationality is associated with conventional forms of strategic political action. The 'emotional' elements of the riot also serve to strengthen claims about the irrationality of the action, as does a focus upon the criminality and violence involved (Keith 1993).

The extant literature on rioting also struggles to explain the apparent spontaneity of the riot. A focus on this issue is also important because it points to the need to explain how, in situations of relative stability, agents act and react in a relatively unorganized and unexpected way. This issue highlights the importance of theorizing change in agency—a limitation of the existing literature on rioting.

Of course, some rioters may express political motivations for their actions, whilst others may not, and it is important to acknowledge this variability. Notwithstanding this point, these accounts are often given in the heat of the action and actors may not have fully processed the reasons for their actions. This issue is echoed by Treadwell *et al.* (2012), who argue that direct questions to rioters may yield either defensive justifications or answers that reveal only the more superficial aspects of the complex overall set of emotions. It is important to emphasize that this article is not an argument for undermining the autonomy of the actors involved in rioting and that any analysis of rioting must start with rioters' account of events. However, it is also important to point out that we must go beyond these initial accounts of rioting to explore the full range of motivations that inform it, because the rioter may find it difficult to access these motivations in the immediate context of the riot. Given the spontaneity of rioting, it is plausible that actors will not have processed the full range of motivations that inform their actions. Rioting, therefore, is a unique form of political action, which requires an in-depth engagement with rioters both during and after the riot, if we are to understand how political motivations inform this action.

### *Defining motivations and grievances*

Before we proceed, let us be clear about what 'motive' and 'grievance' mean. Motives are something 'that cause a person to act in a certain way', such that they may be thought of as the reasons for people's actions (Oxford Dictionary 2013). Motives, then, can be seen to *inform* action because they lead to them. Motives can be known to the individual, so, for example, my motivation for running for the bus is that, if I do not, I may miss it and will be late for work. Alternatively, motives may exist in a dormant state, until prompted by an event or trigger of some sort. These motives can be linked to grievances. So, an individual may not have previously reflected on long-standing negative community relations with the police, because this is just an everyday part of their life, but these issues come to the fore once an event like the shooting of Mark Duggan occurs. I discuss habitus in more detail below, but it is important to point out that this



latter understanding of motives draws on habitus, in that we know that habitus can remain relatively stable until there is a rupture, which causes the individual to either reassess and change their habitus or remain with their former habitus. The account of rioting developed here asks us to consider the possibility that motivations do not need to be articulated to exist, but exist in the habitus nonetheless. From such a perspective, lack of articulated political motivations should not be seen as a sign of their absence.

Grievances, on the other hand, involve ‘a wrong considered as grounds for complaint, or something believed to cause distress’ (*Oxford Dictionary* 2013). The wrongs referred to here would relate to unemployment, poverty and social deprivation as experienced by the individuals engaged in the rioting. Grievances may refer to single events, such as a particular incident with the police. Understood in the context of the habitus, grievances may also draw on various memories and experiences over a life course. Given the capacity of the habitus to collect and consolidate such experiences, it is reasonable to think a grievance towards the police may draw on various memories, which may, or may not, be accessible to the agent in the event of the riot, but which cumulatively translate as a grievance. In rioting, there is a clear relationship between motives and grievances, because grievances may provide motivations for rioting. We can go one step further than this to suggest that motivations can become political motivations when actors decide to protest against such grievances.

Returning to the question raised earlier about how we can identify motivations for the riot if they are not articulated, this approach provides political *motivations* for the riot because it shows how grievances and motivations are *stored* until they are *triggered* in the rioter’s habitus. This means that, whilst individuals may have concerns about issues, they may not feel able to do anything about them, or there are few channels to do so. However, the riot, or its triggering events, represents an opportunity for stored grievances to be expressed, because the riot represents a rupture in the habitus. The storing of grievances or motivations is an important part of the process, because it suggests that motivations and grievances remain dormant in habitus—un-activated, as it were—until there is an opportunity for them to be expressed.

Once the rupture or riot occurs, motivations and grievances may not necessarily be articulated or translate into recognizable political actions, such as in recognized forms of protest, but we must recognize the rupture involved in the act, and its political potential. Of course, the political potential of these acts may not be at all fulfilled, which explains why they often end up as looting and criminality. As Bourdieu emphasizes, it is very difficult to change one’s habitus, so, although the rioter may have succeeded in rupturing the habitus, following the rupture through to achieve change is difficult, but not impossible (McNay 1999; Adkins 2003). The concept of habitus has been mentioned multiple times in this article thus far, but without being defined; it comes to the fore in the next section.

### *A Theoretical Framework for Theorizing Rioters*

In this section, I outline a theoretical frame for understanding rioters. I do this in three stages. First, I consider Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and show how it successfully captures the highly complex, but mundane, nature of seamless everyday interaction between agents and social structures, which I argue should underpin our understanding

of rioters. Next, I argue that there are *preconscious* elements of habitus which are integral to its operation. I recognize that both Bourdieu and the wider literature on habitus do not deal sufficiently with this aspect and consider why this is the case. The third section builds on this theorization of the preconscious habitus to conceptualize the rioter. In doing so, I make two key claims: (1) I locate political motivation for the riot; and (2) I delineate processes of change in habitus, showing the complexity of change and how it can lead to ruptures or crisis in habitus.

### *Habitus*

For Bourdieu, our understanding of how to behave and interact on a daily basis as human beings is shaped by the habitus:

... that system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends of an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu 1990b: 5)

It is from within the habitus then that one learns to live life in a taken-for-granted and routine manner. For Bourdieu, it is within the habitus that one deeply learns the *doxic* nature of one's society—the deeply held and practised, but perhaps not discussed, taken-for-granted which is made up of the so many givens in any particular society (Bourdieu 1977).

Habitus is all-encompassing because it shapes 'our overall orientation to, or way of being in the world; our predisposed way of thinking, acting and moving in and through the social environment that encompasses posture, demeanour, outlook, expectations, and tastes' (Sweetman 2003: 532). Moreover, habitus is the product of an individual's upbringing and, more particularly, of her class. In Bourdieu's view, habitus brings about a:

... unique integration, dominated by earliest experiences .... Thus for example, the habitus acquired in the family underlies the structuring of school experiences ... and the habitus transformed by schooling, itself, diversified, in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences ... and so on, from restructuring to restructuring. (Bourdieu 1977: 87)

Agency, if conceptualized as habitus, offers a useful frame for understanding the rioter, because it can capture the interplay between structure and agency in a nuanced way, which reflects the reality of everyday interaction, or, as Bourdieu prefers to term it, our 'practice'. Further, habitus offers a conceptual mechanism for understanding the interplay and consolidation of the agent's various experiences over their life course. For example, a rioter's experiences of racism or feelings of hopelessness arising from long-term unemployment are stored in the habitus, which is constantly evolving 'from re-structuring to re-structuring' (Bourdieu 1977: 87). As such, in habitus, we have an account of agency which recognizes the impact of social structure, but which also specifies a temporal dimension to agency, which can help to trace life experiences in rioters. The unique value of habitus is that it emphasizes the importance of Bourdieu's goal of focusing on the agent's practice, as opposed to the theoretician's interpretation of the agent's actions. Agents do not go about the world engaging in an explicit way with rules

or structures. As such, the fact that they do engage with rules and structures requires a different principle of action, hence the habitus.

### *The preconscious habitus*

One of the aims of this paper is to argue for a notion of the preconscious in habitus, which is an argument that has been made elsewhere (Akram 2012). Neither Bourdieu, nor his critics, address this issue in a focused way, which represents a crucial gap in our understanding of how habitus operates. As such, in this section, I provide a discussion of the preconscious elements of habitus and show how it has the potential to expand our understanding of agential actions and motivations and how these are informed by experiences as stored in the habitus. However, I begin with an important clarification.

As will be shown below, Bourdieu makes references to the ‘unconscious’ elements of habitus, as indeed does much other literature. The unconscious as a concept has a particular history in psychoanalysis, with a meaning which is substantively different from that intended by Bourdieu. Indeed, one possible explanation of why Bourdieu neglected to discuss this issue is because of his rejection of Freud and psychoanalysis, which permeates all his work (Bourdieu 1977: 92–3; 1999: 512). Yet, as will be argued below, a notion of the unconscious remains integral to habitus and, in not acknowledging it, we risk not understanding its true potential. Consequently, despite Bourdieu’s and others’ references to the ‘unconscious’, this article advocates a notion of the *preconscious*, in order to distance my position from Freud (1927/1962) and psychoanalysis. So, this paper suggests that the preconscious refers to that arena of influences that affects agency below the level of conscious action.<sup>1</sup>

Bourdieu’s texts are peppered with references to the ‘unconscious’ and, more frequently, to how actions are ‘not conscious’. As an example, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu writes:

The ‘unconscious’ is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second natures of habitus .... (Bourdieu 1977: 78–9)

In addition, many of Bourdieu’s supporters have commented on the unconscious aspects of habitus. So, Sweetman (2003) states that ‘(H)abitus is predominantly or wholly prereflexive, however, a form of second nature, that is both durable and largely unconscious’ (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 133, in Sweetman 2003: 532; further references to the unconscious aspects of habitus can be found in King 2000; Jenkins 2002; Adkins 2003: 24; Adams 2006: 514; Elder-Vass 2007).

Here, the preconscious is implicated in how habitus functions, although other critics have argued that the preconscious elements of habitus reduce conscious actions (King 2000; Jenkins 2002; Elder-Vass 2007). As such, Bourdieu, his admirers and his critics

<sup>1</sup> Akram (2012) defends a notion of the unconscious but, in my more recent work, this aspect of habitus is conceptualized as the *preconscious*. A further option is to term this element of habitus as the pre-reflexive, which some of the literature does (Adkins 2003; McNay 1999). However, this option was abandoned because this highlights reflexivity as the key or normal feature of agency, which is to overinflate its importance. Choosing prefixes such as ‘un’, ‘pre’ or ‘sub’ to add to the term ‘conscious’ is clearly an important decision as one lends claim to a long history of the concept in psychoanalysis, whilst the others will not. It should also be noted that the wider literature also suffers from a lack of clarity in this issue and fluctuates between terms.

all seem to have accepted the existence of a preconscious element to habitus, although it receives very little attention in the literature. Whilst the preconscious elements are important to how habitus functions, I believe that we can go one step further to argue that, in addition to actions occurring as a result of preconscious routines embedded in habitus, motivations, including political motivations, can also emerge from the preconscious habitus. As such, the issue concerning the preconscious nature of habitus lies at the heart of the issue of rioting, in that it is a question about acknowledging that not all motivations or grievances must be articulated or enter the discursive realm in order to be recognized as existing. Instead, political motivations for rioting are conceptualized as existing at a preconscious level in habitus and, thereby, operating as motivations for rioting.

Conversely, some rioters may articulate reasons and motivations for their actions, but, if rioting is a response to long-term structural disadvantage, it may be difficult to articulate or even to understand the cause of anger and protest within the short time frame of the riot. Further, given the spontaneity of the riot, the rioter has limited time and resources to reflect on the act, the range of motivations that informs them and how precisely to ensure positive outcomes. However, as social scientists, in using habitus, we have a mechanism to peel back through the agent's life and their experiences, to explore motivations and grievances which may lead to the riot. In this vein, experiences relating to racism, or other forms of structural deprivation, are conceptualized as having an impact on the rioter over the course of their lives. These experiences may impact at both a conscious and a preconscious level, as habitus operates across both platforms (Akram 2012). However, in the context of understanding the rioter's behaviour, it is the preconscious arena which is of particular relevance.

Acknowledging the preconscious and unarticulated nature of motivations and, further, the routinized nature of everyday life is important, because it stands in stark contrast to accounts which conceptualize agency largely in terms of reflexivity, decision making and actors who are unaffected by habit or anything below consciousness. This position is particularly reflected in the work of Margret Archer (2012) (but see also the de-traditionalization thesis advocated by Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), who has spent much of the last two decades elaborating her conception of agency. For Archer, reflexivity is progressively replacing routine action in late modernity, particularly in more advanced societies. Unsurprisingly, she is highly critical of Bourdieu's habitus, arguing that it downplays reflexivity (Archer 2012: 75). I am not disputing that reflexivity or decision making are important. It is just that the literature holds that it is just one characteristic amongst others, and is certainly not the dominant characteristic of agency, as is argued by Archer.

### *The impact of the rioter's past on the present during the riot*

Bourdieu places significant weight on the connection between the agent's history and their 'everyday practice' (Bourdieu 1977), which is important for identifying political motivations in the riot. He suggests that habitus has a *hysteresis*<sup>2</sup> effect, in which the

<sup>2</sup> The term 'hysteresis' has its origins in physics and refers to the lag in response exhibited by a body in reacting to changes in the forces, especially magnetic forces, affecting it (Oxford English Dictionary 2013).

‘disproportional weight of early experience in the generation of embodied dispositions creates a temporal lag in the logic of practice’ (Bourdieu 1990a: 59). In effect, as a result of this temporal domain, agency, defined as habitus, is capable of encapsulating the whole of an individual’s biography. The preconscious will have a critical role to play here, because, as Bourdieu suggests, ‘in each of us, in varying proportions, there is a part of yesterday’s man .... Yet, we do not sense this man of the past, because he is inveterate in us, he makes up the unconscious part of ourselves’ (Bourdieu 1977: 72). The relationship between past and present, and various forms of structural influence, will be the site of much overlap, reinforcement and even contradiction. For example, an individual’s habitus might contain experiences based on the social structural impact of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, as well as more particular forms of structural influence, such as an individual’s commitment to institutions or particular roles. These experiences from the past provide fertile motivations for rioting and, through the notion of hysteresis and a preconscious habitus, we can develop a more in-depth account of how these motivations inform rioting. Crucially, it is the preconscious element of habitus which enables one to explain why the agent herself may be unaware of how these earlier experiences inform current behaviour.

As a result of the hysteresis effect in the habitus, political motivations for the riot can be identified, if the riot is conceptualized as the (end) product of a ‘process’ and not a single ‘event’. This process definition of the riot is intimately related to the agent’s history, as contained in the agent’s habitus. Long-term and embedded issues related to race/ethnicity may emerge in an apparent spontaneous way, but this does not equate to their political motivations being spontaneous and, thus, spurious. As such, we must overcome a simple search for agential strategy and intentionality and, instead, examine agential political motivations over a longer time period, hence the need for a better understanding of change in agency.

There is another piece in this puzzle which is crucial for understanding the rioter’s habitus, namely why the riot occurs at a particular point in time, and whether it will lead to a concerted effort on the rioter’s part, to enact change in their life. From my perspective, the riot occurs when it does because it represents a rupture in the rioter’s habitus. In other words, the trigger event of a riot represents a moment of critical reflection which may, or may not, be seized upon to create positive change in one’s life. Creating change, however, is difficult, and the utility of Bourdieu’s habitus is that it reflects the difficulty of change. As such, it offers a contrast to theories of reflexivity which suggest that we are living in an era where there are constant opportunities to redesign our lives and change as we wish. This is an important issue, which is addressed in the next section.

### *Rioting as an attempt at changing one’s habitus*

If riots are informed by political motivations, why do rioters choose to express themselves by rioting and not in a protest, or through other means of expression, which arguably might be more successful? Similarly, if a riot is political, why are riots often isolated and irregular phenomena? In order to answer these questions, we must understand the inherent difficulty for rioters in acknowledging and addressing the need for broad-ranging change in their lives. Bourdieu is useful here because habitus highlights



the difficulty of acknowledging and instituting change in one's life, given the deep level at which many structures, norms and habits operate in habitus, and shape rioters' lives. For example, let's assume the rioters' grievances result from deeply embedded racism in society, as reflected in growing up in ethnically segregated ghettos, and/or from long-term antagonistic relationships with the police. Rioters may be aware of these issues, but acting to change them is difficult because the problems are so great. Consequently, rioting represents an attempt at change or protest by actors on issues which are ordinarily deeply embedded, so solving them may seem like a hopeless task. As such, riots are a successful rupture in the agents' habitus and result from underlying grievances becoming salient. In such a scenario, issues of racism and an antagonistic relationship with the police are played out in ways that were not previously possible.

### *The difficulty of change*

Developing an adequate theory of change, which is reliant on a notion of the preconscious, is central to understanding how agency operates and rioting occurs. Because habitus operates on a preconscious platform, change is certainly difficult and intentional change even more so. As such, the charge of determinism is often directed at Bourdieu (Alexander 1995; Jenkins 2002; Elder-Vass 2007). However, McNay (1999: 113) suggests that Bourdieu's work is valuable because it demonstrates the difficulty of change: '... it provides a corrective to certain theories of reflexive transformation which overestimate the extent to which individuals are able to reshape identity' (see also Adkins 2003; Sweetman 2003; Adams 2006;). In an era of 'identity mobility' (Giddens 1991), where agents are said to be engaging in lifestyle choices, we see that, at a preconscious level, class, gender and ethnicity structures are enduring, despite outward attempts by agents to change lifestyles. Habitus draws attention to norms that operate below the level of consciousness. As such, we might suggest that it will take more than a simple 'act of will' to resist, or change, norms and, as McNay states, 'no matter how many levels of consciousness one reaches, the problems always go deeper' (McNay 1999). In this vein, whilst the rioter may want to change her life, taking positive steps in this regard is an inherently difficult task, as it will involve making changes in a range of fields, such as in access to education, housing and employment. The existing literature examining the demographic background of rioters confirms this analysis (Keith 1993; Amin 2002).

Whilst change in habitus is difficult, it is not impossible and it is a continuous process. Bourdieu suggests that change is not only possible; it is 'always already' in progress (Bourdieu 2000: 235). However, it is change within the limits of the structures and expressions of the habitus. The more unstable the habitus, the more it is confronted with novel situations and agents and, thus, the broader the scope of change, or the greater the 'margin of freedom' for invention (Bourdieu 2000: 235). Disruptions and 'interventions' in the habitus occur in at least two ways: changing circumstances in the habitus, such as a *crisis* 'make dispositions dysfunction'; and dispositions may also 'waste away or weaken through lack of use' (Bourdieu 2000: 160). In other words, the habitus 'changes constantly in response to new experiences' (Bourdieu 2000: 161). This approach to change provides a useful lens with which to conceptualize underlying struggles in habitus, which emerge during the riot, as a result of either disruptions or interventions in habitus. The trigger event in a riot, such as the shooting of Mark

Duggan in the 2011 riots in the United Kingdom, functions as a disruption or intervention in habitus. On this understanding, what may appear to be spontaneous action is, in fact, the underlying struggle within the habitus coming to the surface. As such, the rioters' grievances operate at the level of the preconscious, until they become visible during the riot, which leads to change and a possible new settlement in the habitus.

### *In Conclusion*

Having discussed Bourdieu's concept of habitus and shown how this provides a useful mechanism for understanding how underlying grievances and motivations are stored in the habitus until they find an outing in the riot, we can now draw together the insights from this article and present some concluding thoughts.

The study of rioting, as it currently stands, offers various accounts of the act, most notably in the form of the post-political thesis (Treadwell *et al.* 2012) or in the work of Waddington (2010) or Keith (1993). Yet, for those who recognize a political element to rioting, there are limited explanations of how to understand this spontaneous act, which often involves elements of criminality and looting. This lack of clarity also impacts on how wider society and the media respond to riots. In highlighting the importance of a theorization of agency to this debate, which is premised on Bourdieu's preconscious habitus, I show that rioting can be a distinctly political action, where politics is defined as involving an unequal distribution of power, wealth and resources. A related key finding is that motivations and grievances do not have to be articulated to exist. Whilst they may be articulated, their existence is not dependent upon articulation. Crucially, it is only through understanding how habitus operates that one can arrive at this understanding.

Through providing an account of how change occurs in the preconscious habitus, this article explored the difficulty of creating change in one's life, and the inherent difficulties rioters face in addressing the issues which constrain their lives. The broader point here is that, whilst the riot represents a rupture of the habitus, and a partial airing of issues, there are few positive outcomes from riots, as is reflected in the high numbers of arrests which usually follow (Berman 2011). This is not only because rioting is characterized by looting and violence, but also because rioters are often unorganized and may be unclear about what their shared aims are. Rioting, then, is a form of protest, but it should be acknowledged that its fraught nature reveals the complexity of instituting change in one's life.

As part of my argument, I highlight the neglect of the preconscious in habitus. Incorporating this aspect of agency broadens the scope of social and political analysis, because it enables the social scientist to probe motivations, or what may appear to be a lack of motivations, for actions. Further, it helps us to recognize the existence of deep-seated motivations, which cannot be explained through intentionality or an explicit articulation of reasons for actions. Such a concept could significantly enhance research into rioting. Notwithstanding this, any analysis of rioters' motivations needs to begin with an analysis of the rioters' understanding of, and explanations for, their behaviour. This paper is not arguing that there is no agential autonomy, as this would be indefensible. Instead, I advocate a theoretically informed and more nuanced approach to how we understand rioters and their accounts of rioting. Simply posing direct questions to

rioters during, or immediately after, the riot about their motivations regarding such a complex issue is unlikely to encourage genuine self-analysis or allow enough time to enable the interviewer to encourage such analysis. In such a scenario, the accounts received may be defensive or self-justificatory and lacking in detailed consideration of the act or the motivations that led to it. Whilst these accounts can be important and revealing, in order to understand rioting, we must look deeper for motivations, through an exploration of the agent's preconscious habitus, which can be accessed using a detailed qualitative analysis of habitus, but also necessitates a broader social structural analysis.

One final point is important. If it is accepted that the preconscious habitus is important for understanding rioting, then this must be acknowledged in both theoretical and methodological discussions (Akram 2014). The main aim here has been to open this issue for discussion. However, an important next step is to discuss the methodological implications of the concept of agency advocated here and how this can be utilized in research into rioting. Rioters are a notoriously difficult group to access and the theoretical approach developed in this article would require significant time and resources, making this task even more difficult. This is a challenge with which the social sciences must deal, if we are to better understand rioters and help to address their grievances.

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