**I found the truth in Foot Locker: London 2011, urban culture and the post-political city**

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The most recognised individual from the 2011 London riots remains anonymous. He is the young man in Kerim Ökten’s photograph that appeared on the front page of both *The Guardian* and *The Independent* on Tuesday 9 August, the morning after the worst night of rioting (the photograph was also chosen for the cover of TIME magazine, dated August 22, 2011). Slavoj Žižek used the image for the cover of his 2012 book, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (although he chose to replace the anonymous protestor with an image of himself). The photograph is startling, an instant classic of urban culture in embittered neoliberal London (see Fig. 1). The young man, clad in grey Adidas, crosses a Hackney street in front of an upturned burning car. Against a dramatic backdrop of flames he is isolated by Ökten’s lens; caught unawares, distracted. The urban and political context of the image compels the viewer to seek confirmation of his ‘race’ or ethnicity, such has been the representational and symbolic inseparability of ‘race’, criminality and the ‘inner city’ since the 1980s (Keith 1993; Millington 2011). But the viewer is left unsure. His face, from his dark eyes down, is covered by a scarf or shawl. London’s recent ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec 2007) has, in so many ways, challenged dichotomies of ‘race’ in the city. We might wonder, fully aware of the draconian response of the state, whether the young man was one of the 4000 people arrested during or immediately after the disturbances, or one of the 945 sentenced to immediate custody? (Bridges 2012: 7). Much of the fascination with this picture comes from its ambiguity. It’s a restless image. This young man is not swaggering; he looks nervous, pensive. His left foot hangs in the air as if he is about to urgently change direction.

[insert figure 1 here]

**Figure 1: August 8 2011** (Kerim Ökten/ EPA)

The frame seized so brilliantly by Ökten almost, but not quite, segues into the next. It is akin to what Walter Benjamin calls a ‘dialectical image’, an image to be found wherever the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest or approaching breaking point (Frisby 1985: 221). This might explain why the young man in Ökten’s photograph has become something of a *tabula rasa* upon which judgments of young, poor people in London have been projected. His identity has become over-determined by the wider social imaginary. These range from criminal, ‘pure and simple’ (Prime Minister David Cameron), to a member of a feral underclass (then justice secretary Ken Clarke), to a sorry symbol of the ‘impotent rage and despair’ of the post-political age (Žižek 2011). Later, more positive and more nuanced identities have emerged to challenge these interpretations, including independently produced documentaries *Riot From Wrong* (Teddy Nygh, 2012) and *Riots Reframed* (Fahim Alam, 2015), whose young director was arrested during the riots and released on bail from prison. The release of this second documentary, almost four years after the riots, demonstrates how these protests have extended in time; it reveals the possibilities that emerge from a given situation. In turn, this points to the futility of analysing the riots as a single event or even as a sequence of ‘events’. As Isin (2012: 115) argues, the full meaning of an act can only be produced once it has ended. In its continued ability to invoke a variety of meanings, Ökten’s remarkable photograph attests to both the openness and contradictions of history[[1]](#endnote-1).

This analysis contributes to radical geographical discussions around politics and protest in the city. Spectacular ‘events’ such as Occupy, the Arab Spring, Gezi Park and the many anti-austerity protests in European cities have, in recent years, made these deliberations increasingly urgent. In many instances discussions have focused on either politics/ post-politics (e.g. Dikeç 2005; Swyngedouw 2009), or particular urban protests (e.g. Lopes de Souza and Lipsietz 2011; Gül *et al* 2014; Kuymulu 2013). This article portrays the London riots of 2011 in an organic, Lefebvrian sense, viewing the disturbances as a ‘concrete totality’ comprised of multiple layers of determination. In particular it takes issue with ‘strong’ variants of the post-political thesis from sociology and criminology which over-emphasise aspects such as looting and consumerism. The effect of this is to insist upon a diminished form of political practice and subjectivity. In contrast, this paper considers the spaces of politics and dissensus still to be found in the neoliberal city; but aims, more specifically, to understand how these spaces are intertwined with expressive forms of urban culture.

The article begins with an overview of what is implied by the notion of the post-political, before looking more closely at post-political interpretations of the 2011 riots (focusing specifically on London[[2]](#endnote-2)). In their close adherence to Žižek’s line on the riots, these sociological and criminological explanations offer a ‘strong’ interpretation of the post-political thesis. The section that follows aims to do two things. First, it offers a critique of the restricted sense of political subjectivity implied by ‘strong’ post-political interpretations of the riots. Second, it attempts to demonstrate how participation in the riots and their aftermath may be seen as indicative of an ‘anticipatory consciousness’ (Bloch 1986) that is generative of urban politics. This discussion moves into an analysis of London hip-hop, a ‘discursive space’ that is constituted by and overlaps with the material spaces of the city. Hip-hop, it is argued, reveals an ironic, complex and reflexive dialogue about identity, justice and politics far removed from the caricature offered by ‘strong’ post-political denouncements of the young urban subject. Finally, the preceding discussions are aligned with radical geographical readings of the post-political city that stress not only the evacuation of the political dimension from the city but also the opportunities for ‘the re-emergence of the proto-political’ (Swyngedouw 2014: 172). This more hopeful position suggests that while aspects of the post-political should be accepted, it would be a mistake to allow this concept to do *too much work* in explaining (and containing) circulatory networks of politics, space and culture in the contemporary city.

# Post-politics and London 2011

According to Murji and Neal (2011) riots tend to make relatively easy sense. The ‘meaning’ of 2011’s disturbances, however, is not so easily decipherable; it’s hermeneutics appear as fragmented as the millions of text messages that young protestors zapped across the city in order to communicate with one another. As the Home Affairs Committee (2011: 31) states, ‘[…] unlike some events in the past, […] there does not seem to be any clear narrative, nor a clear element of protest or clear political objectives’. Both ‘race’ and class have been raised, dismissed and raised again in attempts to identify a political meaning for the uprising (Murji and Neal 2011; Solomos 2011; Scambler and Scambler 2011). The general tone among commentators and academics has been that the riots were disappointingly apolitical. For example, David Harvey (2012) has denied the possibility of understanding the riots in terms of a coherent class narrative, suggesting that August 2011 offered a twist on slash-and-burn capitalism, where young people ‘mimic on the streets of London what corporate capital is doing to planet earth’ (ibid: 156). For Harvey, the London riots are a poor relation to ‘the various glimmers of hope and light around the world’ that include ‘the indignados movements in Spain and Greece, the revolutionary impulses in Latin America [and] the peasant movements in Asia’ all of which, unlike London’s tumultuous uprising, have been able to ‘see through the vast scam that a predatory and feral global capitalism has unleashed upon the world’ (ibid: 157). The political ambivalence of the London riots has, for many, made them emblematic of the ‘post-political’ age.

The post-political is argued to represent a juncture where liberal democracy coupled with free market capitalism are unequivocally presented as offering the best of all political and economic systems. Serious consideration of alternatives to this ‘capito-parliamentary ideal’ are, as Badiou puts it, censured; any debate is foreclosed. Politics (and history) have, in this sense, ground to a halt, adding new resonance to postmodern notions of the ‘death of the subject’. In the post-political age there is widespread cynicism towards politics and politicians. Utopian ideas are met with incredulity or hostility. The paradox of our time is that although neoliberal capitalism is widely recognised for its flaws and contradictions people are fearful of change.

In a post-political society everything *appears* politicized but dialogue is so strictly managed and non-committal that it rarely leads to serious conflict or division. Inclusion and plurality are the primary aim while absolute and irreversible choices are avoided at all costs (Swyngedouw 2009: 609). In Rancière’s (2004: 7) terms, post-politics concerns the ‘distribution of the sensible’: ‘the system of self-evident facts […] that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’. This involves a demarcation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible that determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience (ibid: 8). Another feature of the post-political scene is the diminishing opportunities for collective claims to be made. Demands for jobs or improved public services or complaints against say, racism are administered in an individual or particularistic manner. The possibility that individual demands or complaints may speak to a more universal truth is always suffocated (Žižek 1999: 204). In this way ‘[…] government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension’ (Žižek 2002: 303). For Swyngedouw (2011: 13), the post-political represents an evacuation of ‘politics proper’, with the latter referring to ‘the nurturing of disagreement’ and ‘dissensual public encounter and exchange’. The root of the problem for Dean (2009: 15) is that the left now accepts capitalism as an inevitability: ‘the left is caught in a post-political situation because it has conceded to the right on the terrain of the economy’. All forms of reasonable dissent are elevated to an extremist form of ‘ultra-politics’. This ‘stalemate’—where notions of a just future and a more fulfilling life have become disqualified from ‘politics’—has depressing consequences. Dean (2012), for example, has criticized the left’s obsession with failure. She views social movements as having narcissistically devoured themselves by fixating on piecemeal gains while losing focus on meaningful, decisive political change. Another consequence is that without suitable outlets for collective frustrations to be aired, society becomes prone to ‘irrational outbursts of violence as the only way to give expression to the dimension beyond particularity’ (Zizek 1999: 204). When decisive change is shown as impossible, the post-political subject is

[…] compelled to subliminate that rage, feeling forever dissatisfied and aggrieved […]. Rather than driving a progressive politics, this subliminated rage instead tends to pollute the lives of individuals who cannot account for their own suffering and dissatisfaction (Winlow and Hall 2011: 163).

There is a masochistic satisfaction in this explanation, in identifying an ‘incapability’ on the part of the young to channel their ‘drives’ into progressive politics. This argument is circular, unbroken and self-reinforcing; it reveals the deep melancholy and tendency towards ‘self-denigration’ of the ‘strong’ post-political Left.

‘Strong’ variants of the post-political thesis offer accounts of the riots that focus disproportionately on looting and consumerism. Protestors are described as a rabble with no message to deliver (Žižek 2011a); a pitiful *consumtariat* kept satisfied with cheap, mass-produced commodities (Žižek 2011b: 236). Looting reflects ‘the me-first, grab-what-you-can, everyone-is-out-for-themselves logic of contemporary consumer society’ (Winlow and Hall 2011: 162); it is evidence of ‘the *almost complete* triumph of individualism and instrumentality’ (ibid: 161 emphasis added) and ‘the *total ubiquity* of consumer capitalism’s ruling ideology’ (ibid: 162 emphasis added). Briggs (2011: 399) even ventures that ‘the working classes […] have been made docile through consumerism’. Bauman (2011) calls them ‘defective consumers’who seek societal inclusion through the market rather than collective political representation. Such accounts contain a barely disguised disdain for the young, poor urban subject:

‘One might imagine the embodiment of contemporary consumer capitalism looking on contentedly as even the poorest and most marginalised exhibit a subjective enchantment at the seductive promises of its consumer symbolism’ (Winlow and Hall 2011: 162).

Drawing strength from this logic Briggs (2011: 396) claims that whilst rioters may have felt their actions exhibited a newly found power, it actually ‘revealed their powerlessness and subordination to consumerism’. One well-cited article, mocking any political pretensions (or interpretations) of the riots is titled ‘Shopocalypse Now’ (Treadwell *et al*, 2013). In this article, it is argued that ‘[u]nable to divest themselves of torment and nagging doubt, perpetually marginalized youth populations have become moody and vaguely “pissed off” without ever fully understanding why’ (ibid: 3). The voices of rioters are ‘loud’ but ‘inarticulate’ (ibid: 5). One finds here almost a complete derogation of subjectivity (unless it is of the Lacan/ Žižek ‘illusory’ kind) (see Hall and Winlow 2015) and a truncation of temporality towards the immediate. Even grievances uttered by protestors in explanation for their participation in riots are ‘read-off’ as disguises for their default setting of apolitical consumer instrumentalism (see Briggs 2011: 396). Here, just as in Right wing responses to the protests, there is evidence of what Dikeç (2004) calls the ideological transformation of ‘voices into noises’, the rendering *inarticulate* of the voices of protestors.

A further problem with the position outlined above is that it has little to say about the issue of ‘race’. It is ambivalent towards ‘liberal identity politics’ around ‘race, ethnicity, age and gender’, viewing these as distractions from ‘traditional antagonistic class politics’ (Hall and Winlow 2015: 72). This is alarming in relation to the 2011 riots because *first*, the protests were undeniably sparked after police shot dead a black man, Mark Duggan, in Tottenham, on the basis of racist assumptions about his character and motives. To underplay the continued political salience of ‘race’—to give the impression that London in 2011 is somehow ‘post-race’ (see Goldberg 2009) or that class interests must *always* be prioritised over ‘race’ in terms of reading protest and struggle—is to deny the complexity of protests that, like all historical situations, are ‘many-sided and dramatic’ (Lefebvre 2009: 91). As Gilroy (2013: 551) explains, the relevance of ‘race’ in 2011 is an echo from the past, re-posing ‘questions that had been left pending by the general failure to come to terms either with 1981 or the morbid, postcolonial politics of race, class, and nation that animated it’. The difference the post-political makes is that ‘in 2011 no progressive reforms of discriminatory policing, deepening of democracy or positive adjustment to the country’s politics of inclusion will follow the riots’ (ibid: 553). Unlike the Scarman report that followed the Brixton riots of 1981, this time a challenge to the liberal-democratic ‘consensus’ based upon the specificity of ‘race’ will be not be permitted. There will be no reforms. The *second* reason why the omission of ‘race’ from post-political comment on the riots is conspicuous is because many scholars *have* explored the importance of ‘race’ as a structural and experiential dimension of the protests (e.g. Solomos 2011; The Guardian/LSE 2011; Bridges 2012). Post-political accounts are strengthened by engaging with critiques of the post-racial but it is also important that continuities with the past—a consideration of how ‘race’ thinking and acting *continues* to act upon the city—are not ignored.

**The cracks in the concrete**

Agreement about some general features of a ‘post-political’ society need not lead us down a one-way street. For example, Lefebvre (2000) identifies a ‘bureaucratic society of controlled consumption’ but he also acknowledges the ‘cracks in the concrete’ (ibid: ix), the ‘*irreducibles*, contradictions and objections that intervene and hinder the closing of the circuit, that split the structure’ (ibid: 75). Right-wing accounts of the 2011 riots have portrayed rioters and looters as pampered, selfish, feckless and sensation-seeking (Gilroy 2013: 555). Accounts from the Left have not always offered much in the way of relief. This is why it is necessary to be open to alternative conceptions of the post-political subject, one that struggles against consensual techno-managerialism but also affirms the potentials for human liberation opened up by capitalist modernity in a political milieu no longer encumbered by dogma or party (e.g. Merrifield 2011; 2012; 2014).

Two points are raised and explored in response to ‘strong’ post-political interpretations of the London disturbances. *First*, post-political disregard for the riots (and protestors) within criminology diminishes the political subjectivity of marginalised young people in the city (and runs the risk of reproducing their stigmatisation); and *second*, this perspective neglects how practical activity such as participation in riots and looting can be the genesis for politicised forms of consciousness and action that in spatial and temporal terms go beyond the 'event' of rioting. These points are discussed below.

Winlow and Hall (2011) outline at length the ‘profound *sense of lack* […] exhibited by so many young people these days’ (ibid: 154 added emphasis), yet appear unwilling to acknowledge the intense dissatisfaction expressed, in language and practice, by young protestors in London. It is perverse they choose the biggest English urban uprising of the century to rehearse accusations of post-political conformism. In The Guardian/ LSE report into the riots (compiled from extensive interviews with rioters) many motivating grievances were mentioned: ‘from the increase in tuition fees, to the closure of youth services and the scrapping of educational maintenance allowance’ (Guardian/ LSE 2011: 5). Moreover, ‘[m]any complained about perceived social and economic injustices. Anger over the police shooting of Mark Duggan, which triggered the initial disturbances in Tottenham, was repeatedly mentioned—even outside London’ (ibid). The indignation of the young people who took to the streets in huge numbers to protest during August 2011 was inspired by a wide range of inequalities and injustices. Their actions cannot be reduced, as Bauman (2011) dismissively suggests, to the simple choice of whether ‘to shop or not to shop’.

The passage below (from Stafford Scott, a respected and long term community activist in Tottenham) highlights the sense of injustice and despair that pervades the minds of young people in poorer residential areas of London:

It’s a mindset that says we are treated unjustly, we are never gonna get respect, we’re never gonna get the dignity that we want, so let’s go and just take the things we want. And there are people out there who have their own anger and frustration at the police, and at these institutions that completely fail to deal with them (Stafford Scott cited in Slovo 2011: 44).

The inertia of institutions in dealing with collective claims for rights is clearly apparent here. The passage also confirms a preoccupation with shopping and consumerism. Yet ‘the things we want’ may also be read against the grain to refer not only to commodities but also justice, respect and dignity. As Jensen (2013) argues, the ‘wanting’ of the poor is increasingly problematized in today’s society. Yet who is to say that a little justice, respect and dignity cannot be clawed back by stealing from retailers such as Foot Locker or JD Sports whose *raison d’être* is to appropriate surplus value from local workers and consumers? Moreover, the search for justice, respect and dignity in say, an expensive pair of trainers, deserves to be treated seriously:

“‘[H]avin’ a good pair of trainers around here is a way to bein’ different calibre compared to everyone else. If I had money to myself put away in a bank or wherever from workin’, then why do I need to go out risk myself getting’ nicked for lootin’? […] So that was exactly why—why I went an’ done it.’ (Man 1 cited in Slovo 2011, S. 53).

In the above passage looting is described with resignation, pointing to how productive purpose is denied to so many young people in the city. Looting disrupts the ‘social hieroglyphics’ through which value arises from the exchange of products of labour. It circumvents the exchange of the money commodity, symbolically returning products of labour to the community who work in the shops that sell the commodities, or whom covet them through shop windows, yet struggle to afford them (though it does not go as far as to return products of labour do those who worked, in lands far away, to produce them). It also pokes fun at the ideology of consumer freedom because the retailers looted were almost without exception the same vendors that colonise the retail spaces of the urban poor: Foot Locker, Comet, Currys, Carphone Warehouse and so forth. Looters were no more able to exercise ‘choice’ than a regular shopper. Those arguing that consumerism—a desire to possess fashionable trainers—has pacified the working classes should not lose sight of Marx’s point that while property appears to be the source or cause of alienation, it is really its consequence (Marx cited in Tucker 1978: 79)[[3]](#endnote-3). What the man in the quote is saying is that he wants to be ‘different calibre’; he desperately wants to experience himself as more than he has *been made to feel*.

The ‘strong’ post-political analysis that followed the riots reveals a Leavisite distaste for consumerism and mass culture. For example, Treadwell *et al* (2012: 4) posit ‘the absorption of libidinal drive and desire into the surrogate socio-symbolic life of consumer culture’. Here culture becomes a proxy for our ‘real’ political desires. In contrast, Ernst Bloch (1986) reveals not only the exploitation but also the utopianism invested in mass culture, a yearning for change that is deeply enmeshed with wish-fulfilment. In imagining oneself wearing the latest and most fashionable pair of trainers, one is also displaying ‘anticipatory consciousness’ which, for Bloch, is the very existential basis of hope (and which Bloch argues has scientific equivalence to a Freudian drive):

The ego changes itself into a commodity, into a saleable, even sparkling commodity. It sees how others behave, what others wear, what is on display in the shop-window, and places itself into it. Of course, people cannot make of themselves what has not already previously begun within them. Equally, in terms of pretty wrappings, gestures and things, they are attracted outside only by what has already existed for a long time in their own wishes, even if only vaguely, and what is therefore quite willingly seduced. […] Lipstick, make-up, borrowed plumes help the dream of themselves, as it were, out of the cave. Then they go and pose, pep up the little bit that is really there or falsify it. But not as if it were possible for someone to make themselves completely false; at least their wishing is genuine. […] Wishing, however, only moves upwards in a conventional way, the assiduous young man of this type is dissatisfied with the state in which he finds himself […] (Bloch 1986: 339)

The point is that the dissatisfaction and desire for change and/or creative self-development that becomes embodied in the commodity already exists within the individual. The desire is to become more than we currently are, but this wish is conditioned, always, by *who we are*. We can pep up our look, become more fashionable, but we cannot ever be wholly ‘false’. Our hopes for ourselves are always grounded. As Bloch (ibid: 127) puts it, these hopes are a form of ‘concrete anticipation’. Even as mass culture exploits us, our seduction is willing, not least because it enables an expression of our hopes and desires, even if these find form in a compromised or vulgar fashion. One is reminded of Fredric Jameson's (1979: 144) argument that even if mass culture appears to legitimise the existing order, it cannot do this job ‘without deflecting in the latter’s service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity [...]’. The wish-fulfilment, or ‘truth’ that might be found in a sportswear shop such as Foot Locker may not be revolutionary *per se*, but it is *still hope*; it is part of the ‘grand *telos* of communism’ (Geoghegan 1987: 416)[[4]](#endnote-4). For some, fashionable trainers are a tangible source of immediate self-improvement; they also symbolise the hopes of young urban communities to become ‘different calibre’. As Geoghegan (ibid) explains in interpreting Bloch, ‘rotten dreams are not the ultimate enemies: those enemies are, rather, pessimism and nihilism, the absence of dreams’. Desire for change, rebirth, individual and collective self-development may, in the moment of looting, be channelled through the look, feel and metaphysical qualities of the commodity, but these dreams—*these excess energies*—need not end there.

Another aspect to consider is the contradictory consciousness involved in rioting and looting. Protestors may well be immersed in the local game, or ‘dominated field’ as Bourdieu calls it, where the latest trainers *really do* matter in terms of symbolic status. But then who is to say they cannot participate in this game while *at the same time* being outraged at the death of Mark Duggan or driven crazy by their own experiences of humiliation at the hands of the police? Disobedience and anti-democratic violence can very easily, in practical terms, become entangled with ‘legitimate’ political concerns around educational, housing and employment rights (Attoh 2011). Interviews with protestors reveal a group who feel dislocated from the opportunities they saw as available to others (The Guardian/LSE 2011: 25). This is why a 19 year old from Hackney articulates: ‘[t]he rioting, I was angry. The looting, I was excited’ (ibid: 27). The opportunity taken by some young people to acquire status commodities via looting does not exhaust the full meaning of their participation in the disturbances.

Social life is essentially practical and riots are no exception to this. They are part of ‘the world’s actual doing and making’ (Lefebvre 1972: 7), demonstrations of how ‘people constitute themselves as political subjects by the things they do, their deeds’ (Isin 2012: 110). Riots are, by definition, improvised and chaotic. They do not present a ‘finished thesis’ and it is absurd to judge them in terms of political coherence. The point made here, based upon the Marxian premise that ‘the origin of determination [lies] in men’s [sic] own activities’ (Williams 1980: 31), is that it is only through practico-critical activity that a political, or *politicised,* consciousness is formed. The following quote provides a clue as to how this may happen:

Yeah, that's what I'd call it, unity…It brought unity to certain classes…so there was a lot of unity involved in the riots. (18 year old from North London cited in Newburn *et al* 2011)

London’s 2011 riots feel, for some, like a starting point (for what is uncertain, which, of course, is part of their essential drama). The sense of unity gained during the disturbances brought joy and relief to young people who are forced to contend daily with nefarious boundaries, both externally imposed and self-inflicted, that restrict their freedom (see Millington 2012). They took delight in staking their claim on the city. The unity enounced here is not quite the same as the class-based ‘solidarity’ that some post-political writers yearn for. It something more contemporary and circulatory; it has ‘an *immaterial* quality: it’s a feeling, a structure of feeling, a *distant* solidarity […]’ (Merrifield 2011: 16 added emphasis). Commenting on how members from opposing gangs helped each other raid a local branch of Foot Locker, a seventeen year old from Brixton explains, ‘[i]n the sickest way possible it felt good’ (cited in Newburn *et al* 2011). Additionally, ‘“You saw enemies become friends just for one day,” said one protestor. “On that day all gangs are the same, are together,” said another’ (ibid). Finally,

‘[A] 22-year-old man from Stockwell […] said: "I couldn't believe and I was happy that there was actually standing together and I was thinking, why would it cause something like this for these people to get together?" He added: "For that day, they would have been my friend… Everyone's aiming for the government today. Everyone's voices need to get heard. And that’s what it was’ (ibid).

During the riots individuals and gangs from the margins of the city identified, maybe for the first time, with a common cause. They did not simply indulge in the unhinged, nihilistic drive of the self—though a sense of liberty can come from this; by playing an alternative ‘game’ to what is expected—but also sought personal ‘freedom’ by improvising and co-operating with others. As Isin (2012: 116) suggests, following Arendt, ‘the disclosure of ourselves through unpredictable and uncertain actions becomes our way of exercising freedom […] a capacity to call something new into being whose outcome is unpredictable’. The ‘hit’ gained from participation proved intoxicating: sixty-three per cent of those interviewed in the Guardian/ LSE study believed comparable riots would happen again within three years (The Guardian/ LSE 2011: 5). This realisation of commonality and a collective sense of forward-motion, is why August 2011 continues to resonate so strongly with young people, why for so many, the riots represent a political ‘year-zero’ (even if the history of racialized policing and inequality has a much longer history in London (see Millington 2011)). In this way, the 2011 protests should be seen as generative and formative rather than decisive.

**Urban culture and the post-political city**

The 2011 protests initiated an ongoing dialogue that exceeds the lifespan of the actual disturbances. This is evident in the documentary film *Riot From Wrong* where Londoners express sadness that the riots ultimately caused most hurt amongst the poorest communities. One man says, with a wry smile, how the shops that were looted or destroyed were those that catered for the ‘broke people’—people like himself—who have been left with nowhere to shop. In another independently produced documentary *Riots Reframed*, released in 2015, a commentator named Steaz states that actions such as the burning of a police car can be interpreted as a demonstration of love. Such profound disagreement—between the incandescent energy and rage of protestors and their critical contemporaries—is also apparent in the London hip-hop scene. The existence of these artistic activities and forums for dissensus provides evidence that the 'time' of the protests far exceeds their moment of enunciation. It also demonstrates that ‘there is no pre-given stage that is proper to politics’ (Davidson and Iveson 2014: 144). Moreover, it shows that cities, even in the post-political age, are still capable of cradling discursive spaces that serve also as spaces of democracy and citizenship.

The value of hip-hop in the analysis that follows lies not so much in its ethnographic merits, though these are considerable (see Beer 2014); but in recognising how its expressiveness is evidence of politics as an ‘interruption’ of the order of domination by ‘those who have no part’ (Rancière 1999: 11). Hip-hop artists in London carve out a discursive space in which to practice citizenship; the kind of space that, acting in opposition to ‘masquerade democracy’, helps comprise a more substantial form of ‘cultural democracy’ (West 2009 cited in Lamotte 2014: 688). In this way hip-hop is ‘an unconventional form of activism’ (ibid: 686) that, through a shared form and language, helps construct and represent political subjectivities and spatialities.

Hip-hop is also important to consider because it is so entwined with the ‘Road culture’ that shapes the practical lives of many of those involved in the London protests. The style of the anonymous protestor in Ökten’s photograph is indicative of this contemporary urban ‘cultural way of being’ (ibid). As Gunter (2008: 352) explains:

Road life is largely influenced by expressive black Atlantic diasporic popular cultures. Jamaica and the United States are the principal external driving forces of [Road life] via the speech styles, dress wear and attitudes associated with the black popular music forms of […] hip-hop.

Yet London hip-hop is itself multi-textured, owing as much to the city’s own distinctive black musical heritage—such as dub-poetry, drum n bass and grime—as it does US hip-hop (see Bradley 2013). Moreover, despite its status as a *black* vernacular culture, hip-hop tends not to ‘reduce race politics to the simple binary code of black and white’ (Gilroy 1993: 5). This is certainly evident in the London hip-hop scene which attracts performers and audiences that reflect the multi-racial and multi-ethnic diversity of London’s working classes as well as the untidiness and differentiation of diasporic experience.

The lyrical dialogue within the mainly underground, non-commercial London hip-hop scene regarding issues pertinent to the London riots of 2011 is evidence of an (urban) cultural democracy that invites participation, but also disagreement, from both artists and listeners. Compare, for example, Chester P’s ‘Inside Out (Gimme That)’, Plan B’s confrontational ‘Ill Manors’, Genesis Elijah’s considered ‘UK Riots (part one)’ and Lowkey’s ‘Dear England’:

This is a hell-hole; welcome to the hell-hole

You could lose your shell-toes, money and your cell phone

All you hear is (gimme that, gimme that)

All you hear is (gimme that, gimme that)

(Chester P, ‘Inside Out (Gimme That)’, Raw Dog Records, 2008)

Think you know how life on a council estate is,

From everything you’ve ever read about it or heard

Well it’s all true, so stay where you’re safest

[…]

Oi! I said oi!

What you looking at, you little rich boy!

We’re poor round here, run home and lock your door

(Plan B, ‘Ill Manors’, Atlantic Records, 2012)

Two sides to a movement

And there’s the confusion

We pissed on our own doorstep

So we’ll do the losing

We used to fight for a cause

Now we fight just because

[…]

Where’s the righteousness in setting fire to stores?

That might even be yours or your parents

Who’ve spent their lives grinding towards

To see it fried to the floor

[…]

Any talk of a race war

Is awful disgraceful

We all came together last night

And for that I’m grateful

Maybe we’ll call that a breakthrough[[5]](#endnote-5)

(Genesis Elijah, ‘UK Riots (part one)’, available on YouTube)[[6]](#endnote-6)

[…] Can't you figure its ways bigger than Mark Duggan

Bigger than Smiley, bigger than Jean Charles

Hundreds are dead not one killer is on trial

Just a familiar sound of hysteria

Bombs over Libya but not this area […]

(Lowkey, ‘Dear England’, Mesopotamia Music, 2011)

Chester P’s sardonic track highlights the acquisitiveness that pervades marginalised neighbourhoods in London, where the aggressive commodity-obsessed mantra is ‘gimme that, gimme that’. This, as has been established, is the aspect of Road life that proponents of the ‘strong’ post-political thesis have disproportionately focused upon. The impudence and menace in such an injunction—‘gimme that’—is transformed into a form of humorous self-critique. Yet it is also clear that that this attitude is born from surviving in the ‘hell-hole’ that is the most deprived parts of London. There is also an urban geography to Plan B’s hit ‘Ill Manors’, the most commercially successful of the examples presented here, which replaces ‘manners’ with ‘manors’ in reference to the cockney/ Black British vernacular term for residential area. Plan B highlights the deeply felt class division between those eking out a living in London’s feared ‘manors’ and the Eton-educated ‘little rich boy’ rulers of the city and nation (Mayor Boris Johnson, Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne). The track suggests they would not be warmly welcomed were they to leave their gilded ghettoes and visit London’s estates. Plan B suggests ‘council estate kids’ have learned to live up to, or better still exceed, stereotypes of criminality, immorality and madness: ‘*it’s all true*’. As Perkins (1996) suggests, hip-hop addresses a need among young people for identity, self-definition and purpose—even if this is lawless or nihilistic in content. Gilroy (2004: 70) argues that ‘vernacular nihilism’ is actually a peculiar form of agency, dating back to slavery, that expresses the complicated nature of hope (for those who ostensibly have very little of it). In contrast, Genesis Elijah offers a more sober response (his track was posted on YouTube just days after the riots). Elijah explains how there are two sides to a movement. He acknowledges the anger caused by the shooting of Mark Duggan—the bullets came from ‘*their* guns’—but is critical of how this fury was directed inwards, destroying family homes and businesses. He muses how the coming together engendered by the disturbances, and the multi-racial dimension of this unity, *may yet* be considered an important breakthrough. Lowkey, who provides the final example, is a London born rapper and musician with English and Iraqi parents. His reflections on the 2011 riots in ‘Dear England’ are the most overtly ‘political’ of those discussed here, pointing not to multi-racial unity but to how state violence goes beyond the well-known killings of Mark Duggan, 1980s London reggae star Smiley Culture (who died in 2011 during a police search of his home) and Jean-Charles de Menezes. Lowkey educates his listeners by encouraging them to recognise the imperialist connections between the deaths of non-white civilians in London and the 2011 NATO-led military interventions in Libya. Lowkey refutes notions that London is a ‘post-racial’ city or that ‘race’ can simply be subsumed into the class struggle.

Hip-hop is too contradictory to be considered ‘liberation music’ (Perry 2004: 7). Many are understandably critical of the sexism, homophobia and racial self-degradation evident in some hip hop (see Rose 2013). Yet, even in these short extracts can be found recognition of the nefarious and claustrophobic impacts of consumerism; the ironic and nihilistic tactics deployed by the poor to disrupt social stereotypes; anger at the damage that rioting and looting does to one’s own community; conventional political outrage at the continuities and hypocrisies of home and foreign policy; but also hope that something good can come of a common will that has been identified. In London hip-hop these perspectives on the riots exist in dialogue with each other, revealing a broad-minded and open form of urban culture that articulates diverse and conflicting viewpoints. This dialogue, conducted in a marginalised space of the wider public realm, reveals—like the protests themselves—the existence of who Badiou (2012) calls the ‘inexistent’. As Swyngedouw (2014: 171) writes, ‘[t]he appearance of the inexistent, staging the count of the uncounted is, it seems to me, what the polis, the political city is all about’. In this sense, taking control of the interpretation of the riots and their aftermath, through the antiphonic ‘call and response’ medium of hip-hop (Gilroy 1993) is *part of* what ‘staging the count’ entails. In the cultural democracy of hip-hop can be found a conviviality and political inter-subjectivity—at once sober, playful, angry and ironic—that comprises, in small part, the social transformation upon which, as Marx argued, any political revolution needs to be based. It is worth revisiting the famous exchange between Perry Anderson and Marshall Berman in the pages of the *New Left Review*. Here Anderson (1984) argues that Berman cheapens the term ‘revolution’ by seeing it everywhere. His point is that: ‘[…] revolution is a *punctual* not a permanent process’ (ibid, original emphasis). In his response, titled ‘The Signs in the Street’, Berman (1984) makes a case for immersion in ‘the messy actuality in which modern men and women and children live’, a milieu where we might just find ‘revolutions in the making’ (ibid: 123). Rather than the despondency and melancholia of ‘strong’ forms of post-political interpretation, this discussion of London hip-hop highlights the value of what Darling (2014) calls ‘incremental politics’—acts that ‘*formulate* democratic movements and visions which may, or may not, gain traction and transformative purchase’ (ibid: 88 added emphasis)—by extending this notion from the policy realm into the cultural.

*The post-political city*

The post-political thesis should not be rejected entirely. In fact, many geographical portraits of the post-political city are extremely productive, especially in pointing not only to disenchantment with the traditional democratic centre due to an intensification of managerial control and policing over such spaces, but also to systemic ‘weak points’ where the political may yet flourish. As Massey (1999: 284) argues, ‘there are always loose ends in space’. In contrast to sociological/ criminological perspectives, radical urban geography offers a less stringent take on the post-political. This is outlined below, drawing links between the 2011 riots, London hip-hop and geographical/ urban writing on the post-political.

Swyngedouw (2011: 11) is correct in arguing that the polis is retreating as a space of dissent, disagreement and democracy. Iveson (2011) similarly argues that protest in the city—especially around symbolic, historic sites of democracy—has become increasingly regulated and rule-governed. Others have bemoaned the loss of the agonistic ‘inner city’ as breeding ground for dissent and a forum from which minority ethnic and ‘racial’ groups can gain political recognition (Millington 2011). As Huyssen (2008: 15) puts it, the democratic urban centre is now ‘a kind of urban formation that really belonged to [an] earlier stage of heroic modernity, rather than to our own time’. This ‘loss’ of the democratic centre allies with Lefebvre’s (2003; 2014) pronouncements about the planetarization of the urban and the decline, or museification of ‘the city’. The crucial point for Lefebvre (1996: 170) is that, ‘the possibility of an urban society […] cannot be satisfied with centralities of the past […]’. This is all tied together in what Merrifield (2014) terms ‘the new urban question’, which asks—in the face of expansive urbanization and the demise of the democratic centre—how can a radical urban citizenship be formed, where ‘a citizen of the block, of the neighbourhood, becomes a citizen of the world […]’. It sounds unattainable, idealistic even, especially to advocates of a ‘strong’ post-political position. And yet, ‘proto-political’ acts like the riots and London hip-hop are evidence of the surplus and excess that, as Swyngedouw (2014: 172) argues, escape the depoliticising practices of instituted governing. The dramatic appearance of the ‘non-existent’ on the urban stage in August 2011 signals the ‘urgent need to re-affirm the urban, the polis, as a political space […]’ (ibid).

Re-affirmation of the polis involves, among other things, recognition of the ongoing politicization of unlikely spaces in the city beyond the traditional democratic centre, spaces such as like Foot Locker, JD Sports and Carphone Warehouse. For young people in the margins of the city, these spaces are *already* political: ‘These fucking shops, like, I’ve given them a hundred CVs…not one job’ (quote from Lewis et al, 2011: 26). One of the central contradictions of London’s Road culture—of which hip-hop is an essential element—is how sports apparel shops such as Foot Locker are both aspirational—places where hopes for personal and collective transformation can be explored through the commodities on display (see Bloch 1986)—and profoundly alienating. In a variety of ways, that also express deeply felt antagonisms, such spaces reinforce senses of injustice and indignity whilst also piquing interest in individual and social transformation, the ‘possible impossible’ (Lefebvre 1996): a utopic rooted in everyday life, concerned with ‘the potentialities for more socially just, democratic and emancipatory urban spaces and ways of living’ (Pinder 2013: 3). There is, indeed, a ‘makeshift’ quality to the politicisation of retail spaces in the city. The affirmation of such spaces consists of spontaneous interventions that re-work the orthodoxies of urban development as usual (Tonkiss 2013). These emerging political urbanisms, occurring at the intersection of retail and radical geography, are only beginning to be explored.

While *re-centring* the urban political remains an important intellectual and practical challenge (Swyngedouw 2014: 173), it should not be forgotten that the fragmented ‘anti-riots’ of August 2011 in London thrived because their dispersal and lack of centrality proved so difficult to police (Millington 2012). The scattered nature of the riots, where police could not predict where trouble would flare next, exposed the limits of how post-political London is governed in ways that more conventional protests such as the student riots in central London (2010), the March for the Alternative (2011), Occupy LSX at St. Pauls (2011-12) and the elite university student sit-ins (2015) could not. Spaces of the city like retail parks, supermarkets and mobile phone shops are not the new *agora*, certainly, but then as Iveson (2011: 207) reminds us, ‘the public is not to be found anywhere special, it has no proper place, nor any exemplary spatiality’. And, as Dikeç (2005: 178) states, following Rancière, ‘there is no way to be able to say where politics might emerge from’. Retail radicalism and London hip-hop are examples of young people in the city ‘taking the right to their *own time* and their *own place*, to produce their own geographies, to think, to play, to seize the terrain’ (Swyngedouw 2011b: 375 added emphasis). A crucial point, however, is that political connections between otherwise mundane spaces of cities are being incrementally forged through encounters and alliances that *are* suggestive of Merrifield’s ambitious vision of the citizen of the block/ citizen of the world. In the aftermath of the London riots, young community activists (such as the FullyFocused group[[7]](#endnote-7)) have made links between discriminatory and racist policing in Tottenham and Ferguson, Missouri, even visiting the US to lend support to local struggles there. Together they strengthen the *Black Lives Matter* campaign, making it an international effort (their slogan, tellingly, is: “Not a moment, a movement”). Moreover, in seeking and establishing these connections, hip-hop provides an invaluable ‘global political resource’ (Gilroy 1993: 10) that configures, narrates, inspires and provides a style or aesthetic for transnational, diasporic urban politics (see also Millington 2015). That hip-hop music and style is itself commodified, demonstrates again how hope can be expressed through this form. From the block to the world and then back to the block. Rather than ‘re-centring’ the metropolis, it might be more fruitful to imagine post-political urban politics in terms of what Rancière (2004: 46) calls ‘horizontal distributions’, or ‘combinations between systems [and spaces] of possibilities’ that do not depend upon techniques of mastery or *occupation*. Such developments should rightly be considered a challenge to ‘sensible’ demarcations of the times and spaces of politics.

# Conclusion

The London protests of 2011 were formative rather than decisive. It is argued here that ‘strong’ post-political explanations fail to capture the dialogic and idiosyncratic structuration of the uprising. They impose an unnecessarily inhibited social and urban imaginary where there is little sense of an open future, or capacity for astonishment. They ignore the extended temporality of the disturbances that is evident in discursive and cultural forms such as independent documentary making and hip-hop. If post-politics is concerned with the no-longer-conscious, the forgotten or repressed; the proto-politics of the riots and London’s hip-hop scene—through which the disturbances are narrated and debated—represent stirrings of ‘the preconscious of what is to come’ (Bloch 1986: 116). The riots were sparked by considerable anger and intersecting experiences of injustice but it is also important to acknowledge that political subjectivity is expressed or formed *not only* in the ‘moment’ but is developed continuously over time through practical, creative engagement with the social world. It is argued here that the looting of fashionable commodities from stores such as Foot Locker says more about hope and the desire for an individual and social transformation that extends through time and space than it does about immediate gratification or pacification through consumption. In their desire to instigate change and oppose injustice, participants in the London riots and/or its discursive, creative aftermath eschew ‘properly constructed material and symbolic [political] spaces’ (Swyngedouw 2011a: 13)—for they are in decline or no longer exist—and instead affirm a series of unlikely and/or esoteric material and discursive spaces (including retail spaces). In this way, the post-political city invites the realisation of novel alternatives to the traditional times and spaces of (urban) political subjectivation.

The post-political city remains hostile to protest, difference and dissent. Of course, London 2011 can hardly compare with the working-class politics ‘of education, politicisation and organisation’ that say, Hall and Winlow (2006: 73) miss so much. The protests, however, do deserve a more generous interpretation, which is why this article agrees with Tyler (2013: 183) in insisting ‘we understand these riots [and their discursive consequences] as a political event’. This involves acknowledging rather than obstructing what Bloch (1986: 127) calls the ‘not yet become’ and seeing class as a dynamic process of realisation where a common shared experience is identified and comprehended (Merrifield 2002: 163), as opposed to a category fixed in time and space that exists purely to be defended. But, as this article maintains, the lively class politics at play here intersects with experiences of racism and identities that are constructed, in part, by British imperialism. A ‘common shared experience’ can illuminate the horizon—it can sustain debate and dialogue through forms of cultural democracy such as hip-hop—though it must inevitably accommodate many different hues of experience. As Peck and Tickell (2007: 48) state, a significant part of the global neoliberal project was ‘Made in London’. Despite many post-political obstacles, the question as to whether it can also be *unmade* there remains open. As Mouffe (2005: 18) reminds us, every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities: ‘things could always be otherwise’. The anonymous protestor in Ökten’s dialectical image is evidence of this fundamental contingency in urban politics.

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1. Tragically, Kerim Ökten died on 10 April 2014, aged 42, when his motorbike was hit by lighting. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The focus on London at the expense of other sites of urban unrest during August 2011 is to provide the arguments and examples used here with greater clarity and cohesion. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In explaining this, Marx compares the mystical qualities of property and/or commodities to religion: ‘[…] just as the Gods in the beginning are not the cause but the effect of man’s intellectual confusion’ (Marx cited in Tucker 1978: 79). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The title of this article, ‘I found the truth in Foot Locker’, is a lyric taken from the song ‘Superenlightened’ from the album *Fear of Night* by Relation (Urban Torque Records, 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Translated by author from video publically available on link below. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-rQpkvLuv0> [accessed 5.11.14] [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. More details can be found at <http://www.fullyfocusedproductions.com/> [accessed 12.5.15] [↑](#endnote-ref-7)