The English Riots as a Communication.

Winnicott, the antisocial tendency and public disorder

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In the middle of the summer of 2011, an extraordinary whirlwind of public disorder swept briefly through London and a number of other English towns and cities. These 'riots' were apparently triggered by conflict in Tottenham between police and the friends and relatives of a young man who had been shot dead by police, although many questions were left unanswered as to what else may have contributed to the rapid rise and fall of this disorder, either in terms of broader social and political discontent, or in terms of the psychology of crowd and individual behaviour.

In this paper I want to promote debate about the extent to which these 'English riots' may have been an expression of the antisocial tendency, and the extent to which they may have expressed other aspects of societal anxiety about order and disorder.

I will begin with a brief résumé of some key points in Winnicott's account of early development, leading to a discussion of his views on the antisocial tendency and on 'delinquency as a sign of hope'.

1. The Antisocial tendency: its origins and development
Winnicott on infant development and ego-integration
In simplified terms, Winnicott saw the infant at birth as not yet having a formed ego but of being a 'bundle of instincts' and impulses, including 'primal fears' such as the fear of going to pieces or falling forever (Winnicott, 1965, p.58). The baby has a natural tendency towards growing and maturing, and in the vast majority of cases this happens through the loving devotion of the parent, usually (but not

necessarily) the mother, who holds the baby's experience together in a way which ultimately enables the baby to hold him- or her-*self* together through establishing an ego. This is the process which he called ego-integration, literally the bringing together of bits of experience and awareness, bodily and mental, conscious and unconscious, into a relatively organised and stable whole.

What is most critical in this process is that the parental figure enables the baby to thrive within this state of absolute dependence, through providing what Winnicott calls a **good-enough** environment – meaning that the parent doesn't have to be perfect or to get it right every time, but does have to provide an overall good enough experience which the baby can internalise and use as the basis for a fundamentally healthy orientation towards both self and others. It is this process of ego-integration which is the foundation of the individual's subsequent mental health.

Building on this early experience the baby very gradually develops out from this relatively short time of total dependence into a more autonomous and rather less dependent existence, as he or she develops the capacity to relate healthily with others in their environment, firstly within the family and then beyond into the outside world. This second stage in the maturational process is the foundation of the child's growing ability to relate with the social world.

If the very earliest experience does not work well enough, and the baby is unable to form a sound relationship with the parent for whatever reason, the capacity to develop a secure ego is undermined and the child may be left prone to those original primal fears and anxieties, unable to relate positively and securely with parental figures and thus without a sound basis on which to relate to the social world in which he has to live. Alternatively the baby may cope with the ever-

present chaos and fears by developing a false self, built upon compliance and equally unsound as a basis for relationships.

These are most serious propositions and much of Winnicott's work deals with the consequences of such early distortion or disruption of experience, and with the ways in which therapeutic experience at a later stage may help to repair the damage. His focus on regressive emotional states, for example, deals with the way in which if we have had an early failure of experience we will, when under stress in later life, tend to regress emotionally to the point at which things went wrong, in an unconscious attempt to re-live and hopefully re-work the experience towards a better outcome.

He also makes a critical distinction between what he terms **privation** and **deprivation** (Winnicott 1958). Privation refers to the situation just described in which those very earliest needs have not been met, such that the child is just unable to develop an ego and may be prone to psychosis and other related states. Deprivation, on the other hand, refers to things going wrong at a slightly later stage, when the child has made a secure enough beginning but when some subsequent and serious failure in care or experience leaves the child with a sense of incompleteness, inadequacy and personal insecurity. These feelings, often held unconsciously, may develop into a more long-lasting sense of yearning for what the child once had, however fleetingly and however unconsciously, but of which he/she has then been deprived – and perhaps later still he or she will become more troubled (or troubled again) by this deprivation.

The antisocial *tendency*
Since the theme of this paper is the anti-social tendency one might expect that we will be focusing on those children whose earliest start in life has been so disastrous and who may be incapable of sustaining

themselves in relation to their own mental processes and especially in relation to other people. However, Winnicott was always precise, though sometimes quite idiosyncratic, in his terminology, and he reserved the term the anti-social *tendency* for a specific scenario.

The first thing to be clear about is that he sees the antisocial tendency as being universal: in a refreshingly 'normal' way he acknowledges that every child has, in effect, both social and antisocial tendencies. At this point I must ask those readers whose own childhood was without blemish to 'look away now' – those who never deliberately swore, broke anything, shouted at their dear mother or pushed their sibling off his or her perch from time to time. Winnicott's point is that, as he says:

> 'A normal child, if he has confidence in father or mother, pulls out all the stops. In the course of time he tries out his power to disrupt, to destroy, to frighten, to wear down, to waste, to wangle and to appropriate. Everything that takes people to the courts (or to the asylums, for that matter) has its normal equivalence in infancy and early childhood, in the relation of the child to his own home. If the home can stand up to all that the child can do to disrupt it, he settles down to play.'
> Winnicott, 1984 p.115

Not just to play, of course, but to live a life, though for Winnicott the capacity to play was of enormous importance. And naturally this process of challenge and reconciliation is not a one-off process but a repeated set of tests and challenges through which the child needs to establish what the boundaries of self and autonomy really are – and each time the boundaries expand a bit as the child grows up, the testing out may have to be repeated. So long as appropriate boundaries are there, offering both a sense of being held but also of the potential for further growth and development, the antisocial tendency remains simply that – the capacity for challenge and perhaps

'devilment', for independent thought and maybe also for creativity – though Winnicott finds the roots of that more in play.

Winnicott also had much to say about the role of the father in terms of providing clear boundaries and the security within which the original relationship with mother may flourish. Of course patterns of family and societal expectations have changed enormously since Winnicott's day, and around gender roles in particular, so these stereotyped distinctions between maternal and paternal roles may need re-examining. What remains unchanged, however, is the need for boundaries as the limits of love and relationship are necessarily challenged.

However, if the child's challenges don't meet any or enough resistance, if the boundaries are not sufficiently holding but are either absent or on the other hand too rigid, then the story is quite different – the child is left unclear, un-held, and without the sense of safe autonomy and personal freedom which should have come from living within a secure relational framework. The instinct and need for boundaries and for the security which they offer remains, however, and the child's search for these emerges in other forms.

In the first place this search for boundaries may be shown in the family, and in the form of stealing, disrupting, or doing other things which will draw attention to himself, giving him some sense (however negative) of agency in the world. But if the boundaries are not found in the family, these same behaviours may emerge at school or out on the street. As Winnicott says:

> 'The antisocial child is merely looking a little farther afield, looking to society instead of to his own family or school to provide the stability he needs if he is to pass through the early and quite essential stages of his emotional growth'

> Winnicott, 1984 p.116

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It is as if, in Jan Abrams's words, 'the individual is searching for an environment that will say *no* – not in a punitive way, but in a way that will create a sense of security' (Abrams 1996 p.54). This is largely an unconscious search, of course, in which the child is repeatedly driven to seek out something which is instinctively felt to be missing.

Delinquency as a sign of hope

Here we come to the central element in Winnicott's thesis, which is summed up in his phrase 'Delinquency as a sign of hope' (Winnicott 1967). The argument is that the antisocial tendency is found in children who *have* had a good enough start but for whom things have not developed so well from there on – so they are left with the tantalising sense that things could be better but that they don't consciously know *what* could be better or how to achieve that. This is why the initial appearance of delinquency in the form of the anti-social tendency is seen as a sign of hope – because there is an implication in the child's actions that they instinctively know that things are not right for them, that things could be different and better – and that indeed they once *were* different and better.

These antisocial acts can now be read as an unconscious expression of the need to go back to that lost state of security and of feeling held. Such a child's greatest need is to encounter the metaphorical enclosing arms of a loving boundary – one which will certainly say no, but which will do that without taking retribution or causing further damage, one which will hear the communication behind the act, and offer a response which reaches the need hidden within the delinquent act.

This was and still remains one of Winnicott's most remarkable and profound insights, and one which has had considerable impact for better or worse. We all know about the public thirst for retribution in

relation to delinquency – it was certainly unleashed after the riots – and how important it is to be able to articulate a different position.

So when trying to make sense of antisocial behaviour we always need to ask ourselves what a given delinquent act signifies – why *that* act rather than another, why *now*, why *this* young person was in this situation at that time and what they may have been hoping for. There is a whole spectrum of the antisocial tendency, which is why the term 'tendency' is so rich and so apt.

It will sometimes be the case that there is some particular symbolism in the antisocial act – and for instance Winnicott makes a clear distinction between stealing as a form of seeking love, and destruction as a way of testing the environment's capacity to tolerate. But there may be more significance in terms of the quality of longing or a deeply hidden sense of loss and deprivation which the act indicates – and which it may equally evoke in others. What is critical for the young person is that the act needs to *convey* something to someone in a form which will be heard. If it is unheard it simply remains an act; if it is heard it realises its potential as a communication.

Many minor antisocial acts will be heard and contained within the family, many of them within the school or other institutions, but if this does not achieve what the child needs, the antisocial tendency spreads out into society as a whole, with stealing, petty vandalism, drug taking & drunkenness and everything else which follows. And unfortunately, the further it spreads beyond those who do know and have any relationship with the child, the less likely it is that the act will be heard as a communication and the more likely that it will evoke a harsh punitive response from society and its representatives.

This is where the antisocial tendency begins to turn into real delinquency: if the hoped-for communication does not develop,

because the act is either ignored or is read as solely negative rather than partly positive, things become more serious, and reactions harden on both sides:

> 'By the time the boy or girl has become hardened because of the failure of communication, the antisocial act not being recognised as something that contains an SOS, and when secondary gains have become important, and great skill has been achieved in some antisocial activity, then it is much more difficult to see (what is still there, nevertheless) the SOS that is a signal of hope in the boy or girl who is antisocial'.
>
> <div align="right">Winnicott 1967, p. 90</div>

So we have moved from something hopeful to something much less hopeful, although it is essential to recognise the point added in parentheses here – that the hope is still there. It is that hidden hope and the confused and confusing signals which it sends out, that we will need to seek out when trying to help these young people. This is an approach, then, which encourages us always to look for the need behind the behaviour, for the communication hidden within the act.

2.   The antisocial tendency and public disorder

If we accept Winnicott's argument that every child is likely to show signs of the antisocial tendency as part of their innate need to test the boundaries of their environment, we can perhaps envisage the dilemmas of public order and disorder at least partly in terms of the task of the holding environment. In these terms we can read some of the spontaneous wild behaviour of young people and others on the street as equivalent to the young child's need to try out his "power to disrupt, to destroy, to frighten, to wear down, to waste, to wangle and to appropriate" (Winnicott, 1984, 115). If such bids for power (in children) are handled too harshly or in a spirit of retaliation they may either be temporarily suppressed or they may escalate into something more damaging – and likewise on the street; while if they are treated too leniently or with too *little* concern, they may also escalate (in either context). The point is for there to be a healthy and if necessary conflictual engagement, in which the strong feelings on both sides are expressed and perhaps acted out, but which can then often lead to some resolution through the renegotiation of relationships. The child expressing antisocial behaviour is seen as unconsciously seeking a suitably containing response which will recognise their growing potency but will also provide the next appropriate level of response and containment.

As we have seen, however, where the antisocial tendency is not effectively engaged with, there are real dangers of escalation, although in the 'on the streets' scenario, such escalation may quickly find expression through more distorted means, in which the behaviour may seem to become less focused and more 'meaningless', and because effective communication has broken down, it may well emerge in the form of more serious violence and destruction.

It is through this lens of the task of responding to the antisocial tendency that we will now attempt to read the 'riots'

Social or antisocial rioting

When we apply this approach to the recent riots, a number of questions arise.

Firstly, is rioting antisocial? It is certainly seen as such when groups go wild and ransack their neighbourhoods; this is 'antisocial' in the sense that it is experienced by society as a direct attack. It is clear that most of the communities affected by the 2011 riots experienced them as profoundly antisocial in that they seemed to challenge and subvert many of the commonly accepted social values in these communities. Such behaviour is not necessarily antisocial in Winnicott's sense, though, unless we have evidence that individuals are motivated in part by an unconscious wish for containment and a creative response. If we are to be clearer, we need to understand more about crowds and mobs and how they behave.

It is likely that within a large unruly crowd there will be a variety of subgroups of shifting composition and diverse motivations, and expressing a wide range of emotions (Waddington 1992). Some participants may be taking (or attempting to take) a lead, perhaps implicitly '*crying havoc'*, which was the signal given to the military in the Middle Ages to direct troops to 'pillage and chaos'. Others in turn may be following such a lead, although research does seems to indicate that 'leadership' in these situations may be extremely fluid, and very different from the media's fantasy of identifiable and powerful 'ring-leaders' egging the crowd on either from the front or from the side-lines. Other participants still will be further out on the fringes, excited by the mayhem and perhaps greedy for the spoils though maybe not actively looting or burning. This last group may be engaged in what has been called 'recreational rioting'(e.g. Jarman *et al* 2001), but I would suggest that it is within this group that we will find another sub-group of those letting rip with their antisocial tendency: pushing hard at the limits, but perhaps unconsciously hoping for

those limits to be re-established so that they can actually feel safe again. They are perhaps wanting to be stopped, though not necessarily to be caught.

In the English riots it is evident from the later charges that the ripples spread out much further, beyond those actively participating, as some were charged with receiving looted items (in some cases supposedly unwittingly) although not present at the events.

Secondly, how do we connect – and distinguish between – individual 'disorders' and public 'disorder'? We cannot easily assume that each individual makes a conscious or rational decision as to their level of involvement in this kind of atmosphere. Levels of emotion run very high and change very quickly in these situations, and people may move in and out of 'trouble' rapidly. Early but very influential theories of crowd behaviour in terms of 'contagion' (e.g. Le Bon, 1891) suggested that individuals tend to subsume or even lose their identity into the mass of the crowd, although more recent views (e.g. Reicher, 2001; Reicher *et al.*, 2004) suggest more of a process of identification and re-identification into emergent and shifting groupings, through which people find what they believe to be their place in the crowd - though this may not remain a fixed place for long, because 'the crowd' is not a fixed quantity or in a fixed location.

Trouble attracts the troubled, however, and public disorder will hold a magnetic power for some of those who feel disordered within. It is hardly surprising that when disarray and destruction breaks out on the streets, some people will identify readily with the unfolding chaos and may even feel that their 'moment has come', and that at last they have the opportunity to express in a public setting whatever their private distress and disturbance, or wish for containment, may be. Moreover, because others appear to be doing the same, these individuals may imagine that they can express their feelings with

impunity – perhaps because they now see themselves as 'the group' rather than as solo individuals, and thus (at a fantasy level) immune from detection or prosecution. The wearing of hoodies seems to feed straight into this fantasy – combining the effect of anonymity and uniformity with the imagined power of the magic cloak of invisibility.

Far from being the agitators and trouble-makers, however, these storm-followers may be the most vulnerable of all, because their hold on the rational and the individual self may be much less secure than others. They may be the most prone to getting 'carried away' by the excitement, and indeed to being tipped over into greater personal distress. (We do not yet know whether levels of psychiatric referrals changed in the immediate aftermath of the riots)

This leads us to our third question: Why do some episodes of community anger become disorder and then turn to riot while other occasions do not? We have already seen that there are sub-groups and interactive processes *within* the crowd or group and now we can consider interactions *between* the crowd and its constituent parts on the one hand and the police and other public bodies (including the media) on the other. There are few inevitable riots and probably few inevitably peaceful protests.

As policing of public disorder has developed in recent years, more account has been taken of the fact that mobs and rioting crowds are rarely monolithic or static, and that they therefore need intelligent and tactical policing if they are to be effectively contained and managed. However, it appears that in the London riots in particular, the approach taken by the police on the first two nights was perceived by many as being too disengaged, and was felt by the rioters as unrestricting, which may have contributed to rapid escalation. On other recent occasions the Metropolitan police had been criticized for being ***over***-containing, especially in the use of 'kettling', in which an

unruly crowd is aggressively penned into a tight physical space – often for many hours and indeed sometimes illegally so, as a high court judgement only four months earlier had found (*Guardian* 14 April 2011). By the third and fourth nights police tactics in London changed completely, as we shall see, and order was quickly and effectively restored.

It is likely, then, that our best understanding of the riots themselves will come from looking at the interactions both within and between the various groupings involved, especially the groups and sub-groups of rioters, and the police and related authority groups. With these questions and observations in mind, we will now briefly consider the story of the English riots.

London August 2011

On 6th August, two days after the police shooting of Mark Duggan, a young black man in North London, a (largely female) group of his friends and family gathered outside Tottenham police station to seek answers. They were following a well-established procedure in that area for communication between police and the community in times of high tension, and they were supported by community representatives.

However, this situation seems to have been handled clumsily and with great anxiety by the senior officers on duty, so that after some hours those asking the questions had obtained no answers, communication had broken down and the group came away frustrated and angry. These feelings soon spread to others in the immediate neighbourhood and within two hours had escalated into anger and violence: two police cars were set alight, and later a bus was burned. Shops were looted, TV crews attacked, fires were started. News spread quickly across the borough by word of mouth and by social networking and

other media. Episodes of unrestrained looting and arson continued throughout that night across the borough.

The following night there was similar trouble in the neighbouring borough of Enfield and then in Brixton and Hackney, with more fires and looting. There was increasing alarm in the community that things were getting out of hand, and that the police had appeared unable or even unwilling to intervene. On the third night the destruction spread outwards to Croydon with a very serious fire, and to Birmingham and elsewhere in England – though not to Scotland or Wales. By the fourth night – 10th/11th August – the last of these troubles had erupted but had also been contained.

Police tactics changed markedly from an initial state of apparent unreadiness, helplessness and even retreat, into a far more containing response with much greater numbers and more assertive action, though largely (apparently) without indulging in the sort of violent counter-attack including water-cannon, baton rounds and even live ammunition which was already being called for in parts of the media by some politicians.

By now these short-lived English riots had firstly erupted and spread and had then either been subdued or had exhausted themselves. The aftermath of the riots lasted much longer than the riots themselves, which began and ended within those four nights. Even though the violence on the streets subsided relatively quickly, the repercussions for those brought to court was often extreme, with many reports confirming that sentences have been far heavier for these offences than for equivalent crimes at other times. Repercussions for the victims

were also great, with many people losing accommodation, possessions and livelihoods.

I must emphasize that I did not personally witness any of the disorder taking place, though I was in Ealing shortly afterwards and saw not only the signs of damage but the cards and bunches of flowers left at the spot where a man died after trying to intervene to prevent further violence. I have full sympathy for those terrified and even bereaved by the effects of these riots.

Perspectives on the riots

So what were the riots about? How do we explain the sudden pandemonium, ('the loosing of all the devils'), with gangs of people emerging apparently from nowhere, ransacking, looting, burning and running wild, some of them apparently oblivious to the risk of being identified and caught? Were the riots in Tottenham the same as those in Ealing or in Manchester? Why did they not spread to Glasgow or Bridgend? Why did they stop again so suddenly?

There have been many suggestions as to what was going on. Some observers were only surprised at the fact that it had taken so long to explode, having anticipated that the rapidly worsening economic climate over the previous two or three years would lead to social unrest (as in Greece) once its impact was felt more broadly in terms of increased unemployment, poverty, and consequent despair.

Some of the comment was to the effect that these were riots of envy or greed, rather than 'real riots' or in other words political riots focused on a 'cause' or demand, or stemming from immediate need such as the food riots experienced in Gujarat in 2002 (Samudhay 2002). In this scenario the looting was viewed as an orgy of consumerist excitement, an unauthorised version of 'supermarket sweep', no holds barred.

Some, on the other hand, did see the riots as indirectly political in their mirroring of the greed and lawlessness of bankers or of politicians and even of the police themselves, on the basis that if those powerful people can 'get away with it' then so can we. This view found unexpected sympathy in a Daily Mail editorial:

> the bankers have the same contempt for the law-abiding public as those looters and the same sense of entitlement to wealth as the teenagers who smash shop windows to steal flat-screen televisions.
>
> (*Daily Mail* 14 Aug 2011)

There is probably something in each of these views, though I also think other factors were at play. My suggestion is that for many of the rioters this was 'acting out' on a grand scale – the unthought-out actions of delinquent excitement in which people had become temporarily caught up in wild and illegal behaviour. There will undoubtedly have been agitators and opportunists as there are in all such situations, and probably an instant network of spivs and fences for those wanting to dispose of high-value looted items for quick cash. But a good proportion of the young people out on the streets will have been whipped along into the whirlwind, perhaps briefly sensing a distorted feeling of power and agency which they may never have experienced before, and finding that, for a few brief hours, there was almost nothing or no-one to restrain them.

One group of girls interviewed in passing on the street on the second night said things like: "We're just showing the police we can do what we like" and "We're going to keep on rioting till someone stops us" – as well as 'it's payback time' and 'it's our turn now'. (*See Appendix A for transcript*) This is where it starts to sound like Winnicott's antisocial tendency, the combination of resentful act, hopeful gesture but also the wish to be caught or at least stopped – and I will return to that theme later.

What was also noticeable was the polarising effect of the riots in society and especially among young people themselves, with many of them extremely angry and distressed about what was happening, while others felt more sympathy and looked for more explanation. There was much demonising of young people, and of teenagers in particular, as well as of their parents, and the word 'feral' was used frequently, often uttered with spitting contempt. Such language has the effect of conveying both disgust and rejection and the wish to distance oneself from the problem. The printed and broadcast media became extremely excited, with many live broadcasts from the scenes around the capital in particular. Many conclusions were jumped to, especially that the rioters were primarily gangs of teenagers, although even the Prime Minister and Home Secretary soon had to revise that assumption – relatively few of those arrested seem to have been gang members (Ministry of Justice 24th Oct 2011).

In fact it probably never made sense to see this as gang-related behaviour – in most places it was far too impulsive and random for that. It seems more likely that the riots arose within groups rather than gangs – *large* groups, the instant groupings in which crowds gather together in a moment, turn into mobs and renounce individual conscience for immediate gratification. Levels of anxiety within the rioting groups appeared to be extremely high, with both fight and flight operating simultaneously. It is very difficult to speculate as to what may have been going on in each of the individuals who made up these groups to make them so ready to riot, but we do need to try to explain it. We have already seen how the questions of the patterns of interaction both within and between the various groupings, including the police, may have affected the course of events. It may also be helpful to draw upon some of our professional experience of working with antisocial and troubled youth.

Working *with* adolescent disorder

My own early social work experience was in working with extremely troubled young people in residential settings and trying to help them understand themselves and take control of themselves and of their lives so that they could (as Melvyn Rose memorably expressed it) 'convert their thoughtless acts into act-less thoughts' (verbal communication) – in other words so that they would be less prone to destructive or violent behaviour and more able to express themselves effectively.

One of the most useful pieces of theory which I drew upon constantly in those days was Barbara Dockar-Drysdale's view that violence is nearly always the result of a breakdown in communication (Dockar-Drysdale 1971) – it was very rarely completely mindless, even though it might often be unconsciously driven. If it was truly mindless you needed to be very worried and take serious action. In the great majority of cases, however, even what appeared to be mindless and sometimes vicious violence turned out to have indeed been triggered by some breakdown either of communication, of understanding or of relationship. Once the nature and cause of this breakdown was identified and understood and where possible resolved, the need for further violence usually disappeared. Ideally there could also be learning from the situation so that the next time a similar breakdown occurred, the young person could speak rather than fight. To restore order in such circumstances, we would first of all have to restore some form of communication, which was often very difficult .

What this approach calls for in those working with these young people is the ability to see beyond the behaviour and try to understand the need behind it, and to persist doggedly in helping the young person to identify and explain whatever sense of wrong, or pain or impingement which they had experienced, but which they had perhaps not been able to recognise or articulate. The most challenging part of this work was

often to identify exactly what was the communication which had broken down and how or why this had happened. Sometimes the breakdown will have consisted of the absence of a wished-for response to a verbal initiative on the part of the young person, or perhaps disappointment over a long-awaited parental visit which was cancelled or just didn't happen. Sometimes it would be at a much more hidden or symbolic level, although there was still something of a sense of grievance, or absence or other breakdown – leading to feelings of hurt and impotent rage and then to actions including violent attack, all escalating extremely rapidly.

When all this happens in a regulated planned environment like a therapeutic community it is hard enough – but when it happens free-range, in the open environment of life on the estate or on the high street, it is much harder to deal with. Likewise when it happens within one individual it may be possible to respond and contain the rage – whereas when it happens within fluid and evolving groupings it is much harder to do so effectively.

In fact the people of Broadwater Farm where Mark Duggan lived had more experience than most of learning from the pain of violence and disorder. Following the riots in 1985 there seem to have evolved effective liaison groups and youth leadership, and well-established ways of handling breakdowns when they happened. As I understand it, these semi-formal procedures of consultation between police and trusted community members had led to a relatively peaceful co-existence. Unfortunately on 6th August this collaboration was disrupted, probably because of anxiety, and communication clearly broke down, so that the initial delegation of family and friends came away hopeless and furious – and the scene was set for that same rapid escalation.

One of the most de-stabilising aspects of that first night was the apparent lack of an effective policing response. The job of police in such situations is primarily to keep order: to prevent disorder, to restore order and to contain and then dispel the explosive atmosphere on the streets. On that first night in Tottenham they seem to have been unable to do so, or to have lacked the confidence or will – or orders – to do so. In this context it is worth remembering that only two weeks earlier the Metropolitan Police Commissioner had resigned with immediate effect in connection with the phone-hacking scandal and allegations of extensive police corruption, so the police may have had good reason to feel directionless and uncontained themselves.

For whatever reason, the riots – and especially the mass looting – in Tottenham that night were largely uncontained. The controls were off, and the crowds in the streets quickly slipped the leash of the law and raced through selected stores, breaking and taking. It may perhaps have been these repeated images of unharnessed looting which then excited those elsewhere to have the confidence to take similar risks on the following nights, and which led those girls to talk about looting 'until someone stopped them'. It was an invitation to go large on the antisocial tendency.

Stopping them, of course, is exactly what did happen. On the third and fourth nights, national policing resources were co-ordinated so that much greater numbers could be deployed in the key areas. Controls were re-imposed, the boundaries re-established, and the circle of expectation that each night would bring further disorder was broken. This is a very familiar pattern for those with experience of residential care for adolescents: on some occasions you have to be made to experience the very worst, and to fear and even expect further deterioration, before you can find the real resolve and ability to de-escalate and restore order, both external and internal – to establish peace of mind as well as calm on the streets. By the fifth and sixth

nights after the riots had started, although community anxiety was still very high in some areas, there was almost no trouble, and no real expectation that there would be. What was left was some serious clearing up and self-examination all round, and an awful sense that society had temporarily exploded, to reveal its capacity for destruction – but also for re-creation and in some cases for vengeful justice.

It may also have been that (just as with adolescents running amok in other settings), after four nights there may have been some self-policing or simply a need to retreat from the madness. People may have had enough, and felt sated after all the excitements.

As Winnicott made clear, delinquency does bring temporary excitement and thus secondary gain, which in turn can bring more risk-taking. In the residential context, Dockar-Drysdale (1968) wrote about 'converting delinquent excitement into oral greed' (or possibly converting it *back* into oral greed). In disorder in adolescent institutions the sooner you could find a way to provide food or warm drink in a form in which it could be accepted and gulped down (though not wasted), the sooner you could restore order. I don't know how you could manage that in a street riot, but soup kitchens down side-streets might not be a bad idea (and in this context it was not at all surprising that some looters made their way into fast food stores and helped themselves). In fact what was most important in residential care was, through the use of food, to restore a nurturing relationship by means of which the young people could feel genuinely cared for at a personal level, and this is what may turn out to be the task facing us all in relation to the more troubled young people of our generation: to care more fully both *for* them and *about* them.

There has been some debate as to whether these riots were 'proper riots' or just 'mindless violence', as if 'mind*ful* violence' would somehow have been preferable. It is very hard to know in what sense

any of these rioters and looters may have been expressing political anger rather than collective delinquency, although evidence is now emerging on this point from the Guardian/LSE research, but there may be another way of looking at the passions which were driving these activities. I am suggesting that there is also unconscious political anger – varying from 'rage against the machine' to sustained resentment at oppressive policing, and to the outpouring of frustration at relentless tedium and meaninglessness, though we are still left with the question 'why now?'.

The effects of the riots

Finally we can return to the question: In what sense were these riots social or antisocial? This paper has tried to answer this question by speculating on the possible intentions, motivations and needs of those directly involved.

However, a different way to answer it is to turn our attention away from the intention of the rioters and to look instead at the impact and outcome of the riots, which unfolding only gradually over the ensuing weeks and months. While there was undoubtedly a broad public reaction of horror and anger at the destructiveness, and demands for justice, there was also a sense of these riots having been a 'wake-up call', a reminder that when there is increased poverty and despair there is always the potential for serious disturbance motivated by anger, and as we have seen, the parallels with the apparent antisocial behaviour of bankers, MPs and police were widely remarked. There was increased recognition that some young people had indeed been affected powerfully by the economic difficulties facing the country. There has been some increased awareness of the destructive effect of some police actions such as the over use of Stop and Search policy. As even the early reports from the Guardian/LSE 'Reading the Riots'

research (2011) soon showed, many of the initial assumptions about the riots were completely wrong.

The effects of the riots might therefore be argued to be social rather than antisocial, and even to be *pro*-social in the sense of reminding us all – reminding Government too – that there *is* such a thing as society, and that it does include many very deprived and disadvantaged people.

This is not to deny, of course, that there was also a great deal of serious delinquency on the nights of the riots. But delinquency, in Winnicott's view, can also be seen as a sign of hope – because it suggests that it is *worth* being delinquent, worth pushing the boundaries, and that some of those involved may have been wanting to assert for the first time some belief that they are important enough to be able to act and exert power. The hope within this delinquency will only be realised if the underlying communication is heard, though, and that is up to the rest of us.

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Appendix: Voices from the riots
(YouTube clip of BBC News Item, uploaded 9 Aug2011)

The interviewer (Q) talks with two young women (A and B) on the morning after the riots had started:

A.   Like everyone was just going on a riot & just going mad, like chucking things, chucking bottles, (it was good though)
B.   Breaking into stuff, breaking into shops. Yeah it was madness
A.   It was good though, it was good fun – Yeah
B.   'course it is

Q: So you're drinking a bottle of rosé wine at half nine in the morning?
A   Yeah, free alcohol

Q.   And you've been drinking all night?
B   Yeah – Like, it's the government's fault - yeah
A   I dunno – conservatives
B   Yeah, whatever who it is, I dunno
A   It's not even a riot, we're showing the police we can do what we want
B   Yeah that's what it's all about, showing the police we can do what we want
A   And now we have

Q.   So do you reckon it will go on tonight?
A   Yeah hopefully
B   Definitely. Hopefully

Q.   But it's like local people, I mean why is it targeting local people and your own people?
A   It's the rich people. It's the rich people, the people who've got businesses and that. That's why all of this has happened, because of the rich people.
B   So we're showing the rich people we can do what we want

Comment by another young person on YouTube:
HaHa, sad twats like U will ALWAYS be dependent on the poor. U need us more than we need U twat. We can take wot we want, but you NEEEEEEDDD us to work for your shitty wages. U NEEEED and U NEEEEEDDD and U NEEEEEEEEEEEEEDDD, SO MUCH!!!! xD

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjdhEvosC3I