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Logics of Disintegration: Contemporary Cultural Theory and the Riots in Britain

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The basic facts, still less the complex causes and conditions of possibility, of the widespread civil unrest across England that followed the shooting of Mark Duggan earlier this month remain to be established. While it is wiser than ever in this case to avoid snap judgments and catch-all explanations, what is clear by now is that despite the initial community-based anger directed at police actions and inaction, the subsequent spontaneous and disarticulated spread of violence distinguishes this event from the social unrest of 1981 and 1985. To the extent that, as activist and writer A. Sivanandan puts it, this “rebellion … is neither community-based nor politically orientated,” then it reveals a serious and structural erosion of the space of politics in Britain. This erosion, I would argue, poses a significant challenge to many of the long-held and deeply embedded assumptions that organize contemporary cultural theory in the Anglophone world.

As I argue at greater length in Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies, while contemporary theory’s commitment to the linguistic turn of poststructuralism has been illuminating in terms of textual interpretation, it has provided much more limited and uneven gains for cultural and social theory. Poststructuralist textuality functions to undermine the claim of any text to absolute coherence, but when transferred to historical experience, this approach renders all situations in terms of the same binary opposition of coherence/incoherence or power/resistance, since it must first ascribe a totalizing identity that can then be undone, disrupted, or subverted. Thus cultural theory over the last two decades has tended to focus on absolutizing claims or identities—such as “whiteness,” or “blackness,” or class, or Englishness—which are then shown to suppress contingent differences and to have been all along “constructed,” or socially mediated, rather than being “natural,” or prior to social experience.

Such an approach can of course be illuminating and politically incisive, but it involves significant commitments that routinely go unacknowledged, commitments that limit the scope of critical visibility and presuppose the terms of interpretation. In staging cultural critique as the disruption of an absolutizing logic of identity, contemporary theory fixes the social field as perennially totalizing, and casts fragmentation or disruption as a political value in and of itself, as necessarily resistant and enabling of the free play and undecidability of semiosis. Anglophone cultural theory therefore works well when addressing the discursive totalizations of race, gender, and national identity in late-colonial British culture, which persisted into the 1960s and 1970s. But as I demonstrate in my book, the period of decolonization has encouraged conceptions of national identity that flaunt their constructedness, while all the more fiercely vilifying those conceived as alien or unassimilable, whether as “bogus asylum seekers,” “welfare cheats,” “antisocial” elements, “Islamic fundamentalists,” or simply under the catch-all “security threat.” At the same time, the neoliberal social and economic policies pursued by successive governments since 1979 have eroded the social texture, privatizing public space, withdrawing welfare provision and resources, isolating individuals within the atomized activity of consumption, and rendering work unstable and often part-time or temporary.

Rather than comprising a naturalized and monolithic “logic of identity” in need of disruption or subversion, the reformulation of social space in the wake of Thatcherism exploits the fragmentation, flexibility, and difference upon which postmodernism has staked so much, but which is now reordered around concentrations
of political and economic power that claim to be exempt from public or collective deliberation. After all, wouldn’t such a public be a totalizing fiction, and wouldn’t its claim to priority of deliberation imply an insupportable hierarchy?

The rapidity with which the politically calculable protest of black communities in London ignited a much more diffuse and delocalized social disenchantment in towns and cities across England provides a snapshot of the disintegrative effects of the neoliberal politics that emerged as the dominant response to Britain’s postimperial status. What it reveals is the multiplication and amplification of social differences, which have excluded increasing numbers of the poor and the young from socially sanctioned pathways to autonomy and achievement, and the almost complete withdrawal of the political from its role in articulating those social differences and providing a collective arena for deliberating over social change. Both tendencies feed existing patterns of disempowerment and marginalization, and erode ties of affiliation and mutual responsibility.

Recent events emphasize what might have been obvious all along, that fragmentation is not necessarily “resistant” and does not necessarily lead to the free play of identities. Indeed, it may lead to the hardening of atomized private and collective identities, which in turn push toward deepening and increasingly pathological modes of fragmentation and fundamentalism. An unreflective commitment to the disruption of monolithic identities has meant that, with notable exceptions, little attention has been paid to the range of possible outcomes resulting from the complex patterns of social disintegration fostered and exacerbated in Britain since 1979. As Paul Gilroy warns in a recent posting, ‘We are thinking like people who approach these things through the lens of a privatized world. We only think of these things as individuals, and we don’t see them as connected.’

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