

Book Review: Riot City: Protest and Rebellion in the Capital

by blog admin

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Since 2000, London has seen unprecedented levels of unrest. Its streets have become the battleground for a host of new demands and new ideological standpoints; its occupants, protesters and authority alike, have had to invent new tactics to cope with the pressure of street politics and advances in social media. **Chris Gilson** finds this book, which looks in detail at the story behind the capital's unrest, useful for those interested in the history of the city and of disorder and protest in general.



Riot City: Protest and Rebellion in the Capital. Clive Bloom. Palgrave Macmillan. July 2012.

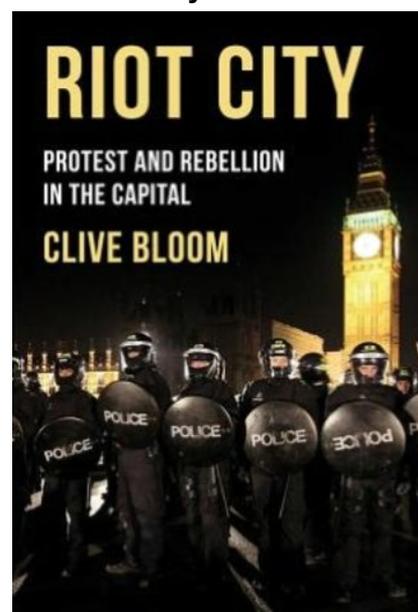
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In the afterglow of the Olympics and the Diamond Jubilee this year, the London riots of 2011 may seem like a distant memory for many. Clive Bloom's book, [Riot City](#), reminds us that far from being an anomaly best forgotten, London's riots must be understood in the context of protest and violent action in the capital dating back many hundreds of years. According to the introduction, this work is a companion piece to Bloom's 2010 work, [Violent London: 2000 years of riots, rebels and revolts](#), though it is certainly effective as a stand-alone piece covering recent events. Bloom's book is a comprehensive summary of recent unrest, and its references which are as recent as the July 2012 Olympics acts as an important (and impressive) contemporary account.

Despite the title, and evocative cover image of body-armoured police on Westminster Bridge, *Riot City* only devotes only around 40 pages to the riots of the summer of 2011, with the remainder of the book mainly focusing on covering disorder, riot and protests since 2000. A final section examines rioting in the historic context of the Bawdy House and Gordon riots of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Bloom first outlines how protest in the early years of the 21st century has reflected a moral reaction to the politics of the day, be it protests against fox hunting, tuition fees, or the 2003 Iraq war. He also emphasises the changing nature of protest. Now, those who wish to resist government and the police ('the agents of the rulers' as he terms them) have an entirely new menu of tools from the online sphere: Twitter, and text messaging, BBM and blogs. Those tools have also enabled new groups of leaderless resistance to emerge such as the Pirate Party, and the 'Anonymous' demonstrators. All of these forms show the renewal of political consciousness for those who feel left out of the system, according to Bloom. While new online movements, both political and anarchic are of interest to researchers and commentators, this book could have made the point that they are much more linked to the student and Union protests of 2010 and 2011, which had obvious political motivations, than to the 2011 riots whose motivations, if political, were likely much more subconscious.

The book then takes an in-depth look at the role of government's response the changing nature of protest and disorder, citing the increasing policing, surveillance, fortification and militarisation of London's spaces by the authorities, especially in preparation for, and during the 2012 Olympics. While the points made are valid ones, they can be presented in a way that seems overstated. For example, in one particularly striking statement, Bloom says that "Democracy was effectively suspended in London for the duration of the games, and a type of unspoken martial law was imposed". To support this, an increased number of police



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and security guards on the beat, the removal of protesters from illegal squats, and increased cyber security are cited. The point being made is an obvious one, and sections of London were undoubtedly subject to increased scrutiny and security. But the other side of the argument, which remains unaddressed, is that these measures were put into place to ensure the smooth running of an Olympic games (as was the provision of bonuses for tube drivers working during the games, as Bloom also cites), which were seen by most to be a complete success and a showcase for the capital. There were no curfews and no mass arrests.

One of the strengths of *Riot City*, though, is in its reporting. The lead-up, causes and events of the 2010 student protests, the Occupy movement and the 2011 riots are covered in vivid detail. When discussing the 2010 student riots over tuition fee rises, the Browne fees review is mentioned in detail, as well as the experiences of the student Charlie Gilmour who was made an example of in sentencing for relatively minor offences during the protests. Through this account, he interweaves details of school-children's involvement in rioting over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. The account of the riots of August 2011 are similarly detailed and contextualised, as is the punitive sentencing regime that followed for those involved. Is it an important account for future readers interested in the topic.

Bloom closes out the book by looking at attempts by the media, government and academics (including the [LSE's and Guardian's Reading the Riots](#) study) to understand the causes of the riots. Some focused on the involvement of gangs, or on poverty and lack of work and opportunities for the young. Still others looked at recent reductions in police numbers or the role of troubled families, but there was little or no consensus on the causes of the summer's disorder, or how it might be avoided in future. The book however, neglects to point out that we are repeating the [electoral riot cycle](#) that accompanied the previous UK Conservative administration, whereby there was a tendency for riots to occur in 'stressed' areas of high unemployment in the mid-years between general elections.

The final chapter then makes comparisons between the 2011 riots and the Bawdy House riots of 1668 and the Gordon riots of 1780. While the comparisons do illustrate that rioting and attacks on authority in London are nothing new, the leaders (gentlemen) and motivation (Catholic relief laws) of the Gordon rioters of over 300 years ago, were distinctly different to the much more organic and acquisitive nature of the rioters of 2011. Bloom uses the historical example to argue that we now live in a time where our consciences do not necessarily translate into actions, meaning that the actions of last summer were an explosion of the self for the rioters, a concept that would have been very interesting to have been explored further.

Riot City is a timely work that explores the causes and consequences of disorder in London in recent times, and will be useful for those interested in the history of the city and of disorder and protest in general. The book's other strength is the picture it paints of the state's reaction to protest in forms old and new, despite occasional bouts of hyperbole. This book reminds us that riots are part of our history, and that more than likely, they will continue to be.

Chris Gilson joined the LSE PPG in December 2007 as Editor/Researcher and has worked on the long-standing hot review contract with the National Audit Office, review work for the European Court of Auditors, and is now the Managing Editor of the [European Politics and Policy at LSE](#) blog. Before this, he worked for three years at the Department of Health. [Read reviews by Chris](#).

