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Ethics @ Noon
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Room 200, Larkin Building
15 Devonshire Place

Abstract

‘London Calling: how imaginaries and ideologies answer for a social explosion’

For five days in August 2011, London was the epicentre for widespread riots that captivated an international audience. In the first part of this article, I provide an extensive quantitative content analysis to frame and criticize the portrayal of the riots by Britain’s print media and main political parties. This inspires the second part of the article, where I turn to the growing field of research on social imaginaries with the expectation that it can provide the insights we need for a deeper and more satisfying explanation. Indeed, Charles Taylor’s influential account of modern social imaginaries is an ideal resource for tracing many of the bad arguments about the riots back to the modern moral order he describes. Taylor’s account suffers from its own drawbacks, however, notably its persistently uncritical analysis of three features intrinsic to our imaginaries: moralism, the way we identify practices that violate our moral order, and the ideological fantasies involved in capitalism and visions of social solidarity. My aim overall is to construct a more critical understanding of the riots and of social imaginaries compared to those we find in the print media or can elicit from Taylor. In doing so I want to make two claims: first, that the response of the media and political parties was exemplary of a mode of thinking rooted in the modern moral order; and second, that while the rioters violated the norms of that order, those same norms veil and exclude key components of the riots. I conclude by comparing the utopian aspirations harboured by the populist critics of the riots, with the utopian moment experienced by certain rioters.