

Peer Review

Review of: "Understanding the 2024 Summer Riots in the UK: Three Case Studies"

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The article presents the results of a comprehensive study of the unrest and racist violence that occurred in three UK cities during the summer of 2024, following the murder of three girls—killings that were falsely attributed to a Muslim asylum seeker. The study triangulates various types of data—such as interviews with counter-protesters, bystanders, and police officers; videos recorded at the events; media reports; and social media posts—to answer research questions about what happened and who participated.

The findings show that describing the unrest as "protests" is inaccurate, as they primarily consisted of racist attacks. Participants included anti-immigrant individuals (those who carried out the attacks), counter-protesters, police officers, and the targets of the violence (asylum seekers and Muslims). Far-right activists participated and played a role in planning and promoting the riots. A comparison is also made with the 2011 UK riots, where minority groups—rather than members of the "white" majority—were the most active protesters. Those riots were driven by anger over police brutality against minority communities, not by outrage over an alleged crime committed by a minority individual.

The study's methodology appears robust, the empirical work is thorough, and the research questions are convincingly addressed. The resulting narrative is both compelling and disturbing.

What is missing from this academic article is a literature review that situates the study within existing research and clarifies its contribution to the field. A theoretical framework is not essential (though it could add interest), but contextualising the research and explaining its scientific contribution would strengthen the work. What insights can the analysed aspects of these riots offer about society, in relation to what social research has claimed thus far?

The study could be linked to several bodies of literature: social movement and protest studies; research on racism and the far right in the UK and beyond; and scholarship that examines urban riots. Connecting the study to previous research would assist the authors in articulating its contribution to existing knowledge. It would also help justify the specific research questions posed, as well as the comparison with the 2011 riots (a comparison that could also be framed as a response to an explicit research question).

The research questions are motivated, albeit somewhat vaguely, by two societal considerations. First, authorities need a more accurate understanding of what transpired in order to design effective policies—something that is impossible when knowledge of the events remains limited. Second, it is important to establish whether all participants belonged to the far right, because incorrectly assuming so could foster an inflated perception of the far right's strength. While such societal motivations are legitimate and important, they should be complemented by a discussion of the study's scientific contributions. Moreover, rationale (2) could be articulated more convincingly. The authors refer to “the claim that everyone who participated was far-right,” making me think that several commentators took this for granted. Yet the only evidence presented is a quotation from a government website describing the events as “far-right thuggery.” Although that phrase is not unreasonable given the article's narrative of racist violence, it is not equivalent to asserting that every participant was far-right.

Some terminological clarifications are also needed. What about a “protest” makes it incompatible with a “racist attack”? Can a protest not be violent? The events under study undoubtedly included racist attacks, but were those attacks the sole feature, or were they interwoven with protest actions? Or is the issue primarily how the media labelled the events? In addition, what constitutes a “far-right participant”? Is it someone formally affiliated with an established far-right movement? Should a person who attempts to attack a mosque or asylum seekers out of hatred for Muslims, asylum seekers, and migrants not be considered a far-right participant unless already organised within a far-right group?

Despite these critiques, I wish to emphasise that the empirical work is valuable as it stands, and I commend the authors for conducting such a comprehensive study so soon after the events. Having taken part in a similar project myself, I appreciate how challenging it is to organise (and to get financed).

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.