Social Justice and Unrest

DIANA BRETERICK, MATT CLEMENT, DAVID PRITCHARD

Wednesday 10th December 2014: 4:00 – 6:00pm
Venue: St. Andrew’s Court, room 4.09
Social Justice and Penality seminar

This session will include three papers drawing on chapters in a recently published book:


Riots accompany major social, economic and cultural transformations. In a time characterised by neoliberalism, globalisation and shifting global power balances, riots serve as frequent reminders of this state of affairs. In this session, Diana Bretherick, Matt Clement, and David Pritchard consider how the ‘stage’ of unrest has altered profoundly, exploring the changing dynamics, interpretation and global potency of unrest. The session considers protest events as expressions of disappointment and frustration with the world as it currently is, but also as demands for social justice.

Diana Bretherick - Language of the Unheard: Riots in Popular Culture

The UK riots of 2011 have been represented by the news media as either a cry of pain by the young in the light of the growing injustices produced by the effects of the great recession or alternatively as mere opportunistic criminality. How have other more creative forms of popular culture responded? Dr Diana Bretherick’s paper considers dramatic representations of the 2011 UK riots. In doing so she looks at the role and potency of a cultural prism through which riots can be interpreted and re-evaluated. Her analysis of cultural artefacts (such as stage plays) suggests that drama represents an alternative search for elusive underlying causes. Cultural artefacts are perhaps better able to convey subtlety and nuance than other forms of reporting. It demonstrates the fact that cultural artefacts offer insight over and beyond the wealth of video footage and newspaper coverage that structure our understanding of riots. Thus the paper assesses the 2011 riots from a cultural perspective. If riots are, as Martin Luther King claimed, the language of the unheard, can the protestors speak more loudly through cultural means rather than criminal?

Matt Clement - Mobs versus Markets: Bristol’s Tesco Riots

Matt Clement’s paper brings us to the Stokes Croft area of Bristol in the West of England. Bristol has a colourful history of rioting as a form of social protest, which also forms a context for recent events. The paper examines the underlying background to the ‘Tesco riots’, including increasing gentrification, lack of housing and rising levels of inequality; the mixed and multicultural nature of the local population; and the inordinate power and control wielded by a giant corporation like Tesco. Several years have elapsed but it is evident that the ‘Tesco riots’ were a harbinger of a growing, subterranean mood of resistance. Spanish squares were occupied, Greek protests and strikes continued - the August 2011 wave of UK rioting followed, and the ‘Occupy’ movement exploded in North America. Waves of moral panic have followed, decrying the acts of ‘the mob’ – that body of protest that has so often been the vehicle of reform and revolution. Thus Stokes Croft’s ‘Tesco riots’ pose us
important questions - how has the power of the mob challenged corporations, and are city streets and squares destined to be the sites of resistance to austerity by a new social movement.

**David Pritchard - Unrest and Inequalities: Comparing Welfare States**

As the recovery from the 2008 global financial crash continues to be slow and painful in many advanced industrialised countries, it seems timely to assess the relationships between social unrest, socio-economic inequalities, and welfare state arrangements. Indeed, recent protest events surrounding austerity and welfare retrenchment in Southern Europe bring that into sharp focus. Furthermore, the weeklong disturbances in Stockholm in May 2013 question the logic of moving away from traditional Welfare-Capitalist models. David Pritchard’s paper initially examines the relationship between social unrest and socio-economic inequalities. It draws upon the disciplines of social policy and criminology to examine whether there are any meaningful relationships between protest events and sociological and economic dimensions of inequality. A comparative analysis of the OECD nations is undertaken using recent data on protest events, income inequality, unemployment, poverty, and levels of trust. In addition, the paper also explores the relationships between protest events, levels of decommodification, and competing welfare typologies across advanced industrialised countries. Using longitudinal data, David considers whether different welfare economies and regimes engender social order or bring about a descent into social unrest.