

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Diane Frost, Richard Phillips, eds. *Liverpool '81: Remembering the Riots*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011. ix + 150 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84631-668-5.

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Published on H-Memory (April, 2012)

Commissioned by Catherine Baker



Riots and attempts to contain them have lengthy and complicated histories in modern Britain. They frequently signify moments of change in broader narratives of class and politics, yet they rarely receive much commemoration. The only monumental remembrance of the Peterloo Massacre, for instance, is a small plaque in Manchester near the spot where in 1819 the local yeomanry attacked a crowd of 60,000, demanding political rights. Approaching the event's two hundredth anniversary, there is increasing public pressure for "a bigger and more significant memorial to an event which changed the course of British democracy." [1] More recently, even less has been done to memorialize the unrest of the twentieth century, such as the series of street disturbances during the summer of 1981 that made tensions of race, class, and policing visible within British society.

Diane Frost and Richard Phillips's edited volume, *Liverpool '81: Remembering the Riots*, presents numerous individual perspectives on the proximate events of that summer in Liverpool, as well as the various responses to the unrest. [2] Through an intermingling of contemporaneous accounts and reflections from the present, the authors identify some of the social problems at the core of the riots and evaluate the efficacy of the various solutions that followed. Frost, a sociologist, and Phillips, a geographer, produce an engaging synthesis of oral histories, published memoirs, and official reports. Their substantive aims are "to ask how [the riots] have been remembered and why, and to trace their impacts: what has become of the people and places most directly affected by the riots? And what of their wider implications?" They answer these questions through presenting "stories and memories ... from the perspective of those who were most directly affected" as well as by examining "the im-

pacts of these events, both locally and nationally" (p. 2).

The authors approach the riots and present the memories of them from a variety of primary sources. "At the heart of this book," they explain, "are the voices of people who experienced the riots and their aftermath" (p. 7). Consequently, several quotations from Facebook and Web sites introduce memories of 1981. In their attempt to delve into the "Experiences and Memories" (p. 10) and lay out what happened, they rely upon informal accounts, published memoirs, more formal surveys, and reports, as well as photographs. Although this emphasis on individuals manifests an implied political commitment to narrate from below, the authors maintain their analytical neutrality by including a range of voices. They incorporate memories from "residents of [the district of] Liverpool 8 where the rioting took place; community workers and leaders; photographers and writers; those who took to the streets; and others whom they confronted in the police lines" (p. 2). In addition, they excerpt "a range of previously published but sometimes hard-to-access secondary material including reports by government bodies and community groups" (p. 3). The book presents numerous viewpoints yet remains eminently accessible, even to those without background knowledge of postwar British history. It will be extremely useful for teaching about late twentieth-century Britain as well as for courses across disciplines on urban issues, social policy, class, and race relations.

The central chapters are organized around the substantive issues that Frost and Phillips identify as characteristics of the riots and their legacy. They arrange the source material into four categories: "Police and the Community," "The Inner City," "Young People and Educa-

tion,” and “Economic Problems and Solutions.” The first of these very noticeably includes accounts from those who decried the police, those who served in uniform, and some who attempted to mediate between them. Many rioters, for instance, “remember intensely negative feelings towards the police” (p. 34), and Frost and Philips present their lengthy narratives. Community leaders provided reminiscences as well as contemporaneous perspectives that validate many of the criticisms of the police. Yet, the authors explain, it is “also important to acknowledge that generalisations ... were qualified by [those], who felt ... some police officers [sought] better relationships with members of Liverpool’s black and minority ethnic communities, and [reflected] critically on their own police work” (p. 36). Frost and Philips avoid accepting either the criticisms of the police or the apologies for their practices.

Some of the book’s strengths also constitute its weaknesses. Its readability and its accessibility mean it does not delve into much depth on the events of 1981 or their broader implications for understanding Britain in the age of Margaret Thatcher. Frost and Philips deliberately eschew aligning their account with political narratives or established historiographies. Thatcher’s name appears only once, even though she and her government’s policies were closely linked to the riots and their aftermath. Her initial reaction to images of unrest, the remark of “Oh those poor shopkeepers!” encapsulated the conservative government’s championing of free enterprise and the affinities of a grocer’s daughter. It simultaneously demonstrated her obliviousness to the struggles of the underclass and minorities and could be interpreted as aloofness at the deeper causes of the riots. She expressed incredulity at claims of racism and police brutality when she visited Liverpool several weeks later. Government documents released at the end of 2011 (another form of remembrance produced in consequence of thirty years passing) demonstrate how some of Thatcher’s advisers considered government social and economic intervention in Liverpool “to be a ‘doomed mission.’”[3] Furthermore, ministers privately expressed doubts about attempting to alleviate economic despair, warning the prime minister against “‘massive injection of additional public spending’ to stabilise the inner cities” and claiming that it would be “‘pumping water uphill.”[4] Instead, they urged a policy that “‘managed decline” in Liverpool.[5] The perspectives of a newly elected Conservative government are notably absent from *Liverpool ’81*.

It is unfair to criticize a readable book that provides so many fascinating personal accounts for failing to accom-

plish more. However, at only 150 pages, it could have easily been expanded to address the ways in which the Liverpool riots intersected with national politics. As it is, these larger contexts only arise through discussions of the media and of the ways in which the government officially and publicly responded to the riots. Frost and Philips explain that “media attention to ... economic problems ... resonated with the Conservative government’s response to the crisis, which was essentially to look for market solutions to social problems” (p. 108). This undoubtedly accurate assessment demands closer analysis and scrutiny than what is provided here.

Perhaps the type of remembrance that would come from a comprehensive account of the riots, encompassing the local and the national, will only be possible in the next thirty years. It seems likely that more analyses of the riots will be forthcoming, since the personal perspectives provided in *Liverpool ’81* and elsewhere can now be combined with the political and public policy accounts from newly opened government files. Of course, with the riots in Britain during the summer of 2011, the resonances of these issues are contemporary as much as historical. Indeed, the *Guardian* asserted, “[t]he historical parallels [with 1981] seem easy to draw.”[6] Both cases resulted in a “quick and inconclusive debate about the social roots of the unrest. A new government initiative to tackle gang culture and troubled families is launched, as was Heseltine’s inner-city drive, as a singular crusade without any significant new Whitehall funds to back it up. The rioters are dismissed as an ‘unruly mob’ who were ‘thieving pure and simple.’”[7] With such commonalities, Frost and Phillips’s work gains new exigency not only as an attempt to engage historical memory but also as a way to provide meaningful insights into public policy, society, and politics in the present. For those scholars engaged in memory studies, *Liverpool ’81* will not provide any new theoretical insights, but it instead offers its own case study of one way to remember from below a politically contentious event of the recent past.

Notes

[1]. Judy Hobson, “Remember the Peterloo Massacre?” BBC News Online, August 17, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6950666.stm (accessed February 27, 2012). See also Martin Wainwright, “Battle for the Memory of Peterloo,” *The Guardian*, August 12, 2007.

[2]. Frost and Phillips present themselves as editors, with their two names appearing on the book’s cover. The additional names credited with the book contributed

source material.

[3]. Alan Travis, "National Archives Reveals Historic Parallels Between 2011 and 1981 Riots," *The Guardian*, December 29, 2011.

[4]. Alan Travis, "Thatcher Government Toyed with

Evacuating Liverpool after 1981 Riots," *The Guardian*, December 29, 2011.

[5]. Travis, "Thatcher Government."

[6]. Travis, "National Archives."

[7]. Travis, "National Archives."

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Citation: Andrew Keating. Review of Frost, Diane; Phillips, Richard, eds., *Liverpool '81: Remembering the Riots*. H-Memory, H-Net Reviews. April, 2012.

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