



Understanding public order

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An understanding of public order, and its antipode disorder, is one of the fundamental issues in modern sociology.

Social, political, psychological, cultural and other academic disciplines and relevant theories united within sociology as a science, give us an opportunity to look at the complex phenomenon of public order through the prism of the nature of human society and the individuals forming it.

The main part of the article will start with definitions of the terms 'public order' and 'disorder', followed by a brief overview of some social scientific theories and their relevance to an understanding of public order.

The size limitation of this article does not allow an in depth analysis of all those theories. Therefore, the article will be mainly concentrated on the ideas of the "founder fathers" of modern sociology: Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Because "time and again, we have encountered some of their basic ideas in what appeared to be the cutting edge of novel arguments." (Cuff et al., 2004: 341)

This will be followed by a brief overview of the pluralist conception of social order represented by Ralph Dahrendorf.

References to the urban unrest in 20th century Britain will help to explain and test those ideas and theories.

To start with, we should identify the meaning of the term "public order". Having said so, it is important to mention that there is no singular definition of public order being offered by the social sciences to date. While the question of order is as old as human society itself, sociology, as an academic branch, is a relatively new formation.

Collins Dictionary of the English Language (1979:1034) gives us an example of the positive approach, defining (public, social) order as "a peaceful or harmonious condition of society". However, the most common perception of public order based on the negative approach, defining what it is not – i.e. disorder, unrest, disturbance, violence, vandalism and so on.

Waddington et al. (Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1.1-14) offered a simple and convenient definition of public disorder as "action which:

1. happens in a public place;
2. involves a relatively large number of people;

3. has an ascertainable purpose related to a specific issue;
4. results in violence against persons or property.”

Having identified acceptable definitions of public order, it is time to ask the next questions: How can human beings live together in reasonable order? Why are some societies better able than others to sustain order without making unacceptable sacrifices in personal liberty? And why, in every society, is the level of order greater at some times than at others?

To answer those questions we should refer to Wilson et al. (1985: 20):

... one cannot begin with the society as whole or its historical context, for what needs explanation is not the behaviour of “society” but the behaviour of individuals making the society.

... Though society and its institutions shape the man, man’s nature sets limits on the kinds of societies we can have.’

The ideas of Karl Marx (1818-1883) made a great contribution to the development of social theory. Marx understood that human beings are the centre of history, and that history is the story of the development of their essential nature. But the history of mankind, according to Marx, is a permanent class conflict, the social struggle for power and authority that bring the process of change - the history itself – to completion, rather than development of consensus in social relations. (Cuff et al., 2004: 30-33) And as in every conflict, the social struggle is accompanied by disorder and violence.

Marx defined class purely in economic terms based on the relationship to the ownership of the means of production, and his struggle for power was determined by the desire for economic supremacy. (Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1. 3-25)

Karl Marx took an economically deterministic view on social conflict. He suggested that capitalist society was conflictual by definition, and as such will inevitably destroy itself. But at the same time, Marx agreed that social change could be influenced, at least to some degree, by the political and social intervention of individuals. (Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1. 9-10)

Having tried to apply Marx’s theory of class conflict and the social struggle to the anti-Chinese disorder of 1911, the ‘seaport’ riots of 1919 or the urban riots of the 1980s, one will discover that actually, this theory is not able to fully explain any of these events.

Whilst we can find a full set of arguments to support and illustrate Waddington et al.’s definition of public disorder, there is no sign of the class conflict or social struggle for power, or any specific class leading this struggle under an ideological flag. While those riots are definitely conflicts, their aim is not political change or economic supremacy, but seeking justice by those suffering from racism, deprivation and police activity. Urban unrest is a violent reaction to events and experiences. It requires a stimulus to set it in motion. This is the tinder created by the underlying conditions, but it is ignited by a particular event which provides the spark. (Benyon and Solomos, 1987:182/Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1. 8-22)

Ideas of Max Webber (1864-1920) gives us a better chance to understand the above

mentioned events. Whilst sharing the idea of class conflict as an engine of history, he thought that social conflict is a struggle for power in a broader, and not just an economic sense.

Webber offered a more sophisticated explanation of classes and the framework in which conflict might occur. He believed that conflict in society might develop around class, status or party allegiance and that social and political matters, as well as economic ones were important. (Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1. 3-30) With the decline of class as the most prominent social division, and the loss of Marx's direct influence, Webber's approach to the analysis of inequality, with its emphasis upon the heterogeneity of status groups, has been seen as a more suitable strategy for the analysis of social stratification in a world in which nationality, ethnicity, gender and religion are more prominent base of division (and the source of dissident social movements). (Cuff et al., 2004: 59)

The early 20th century 'race' riots in Great Britain give us an example of such stratification and social movement.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) offered a different approach to the problem of public order. The idea of self-regulating harmony, consensus, or social solidarity was fundamental for Durkheim's understanding of public order. He believed that the social solidarity could be achieved and maintained only by an adequate balance between integration (social forces of attraction which bind individuals to each other and to the wider society) and regulation (external forces of constraint which bind individuals to the system of conventional norms). When less flexible and often inadequate forms of social control conflict with rapid socio-economic changes, the anomie, or the complete collapse of social solidarity, will arise. Thus could result in more crime and disorder.

Whilst believing in the consensual nature of human society, Durkheim accepted that not all individuals would acquiesce in this order at all times. He and his followers believed that disorderly or deviant behaviour is caused by the failure of socialisation, and, in a sense, is a positive feature helping to reaffirm the system of norms shared by the majority. (Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1. 3-9 and 3-29).

Taking account of both social and psychological factors in the explanation of conformity and deviance, Durkheim's theory of anomie made a 'bridge' between the consensus and the control theories.

Like Durkheim, the control theorists believe that weakened social control will almost inevitably result in crime and disorder. They believe that given an opportunity to benefit from crime or disorder while avoiding punishment, people actually will consciously break the law. And thus control theorists reject other than the absence of control, causes of crime and disorder, i.e. poverty, deprivation and discrimination.

Every case of urban unrest in 20th century Britain could be qualified as anomie, or the complete collapse of social solidarity. But this anomie did not arise from the absence or weakening of control. 'High disadvantage, deprivation and discrimination, chronic unemployment, political exclusion and powerlessness, and a prevailing hostility towards the police are the 'five common characteristics' identified by John Benyon (1987), which provide the tinder for a major disorders. (Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community

Safety, Module 1. 8-22)

As follows from the above, “neither the consensus nor the conflict approach offers exclusive explanations of social order. It seems likely that even in the most consensual and orderly society some degree of conflict is both inevitable and desirable: inevitable, since disagreement and dissent may stem from the differences between individuals and serve to maintain a dynamic society capable of change; desirable, as an antidote to uniformity.” (Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1. 9-10)

An attempt to reach a compromise between the conflict and consensus approaches was undertaken by Ralph Dahrendorf within the pluralist conception of public order.

Dahrendorf thought of a conflict as a way to achieve a consensus. He believed that conflict is an engine for change towards the development of more effective mechanisms and structures to integrate people and groups into society (Dahrendorf, 1959)/(Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1. 3-28) And, despite existing tension and conflicts, society itself will remain a relatively coherent entity due to the existence of special institutions and procedures regulating political, social, economic and cultural life.

Whilst recognising that society consists of multiple and heterogeneous interest groups which might compete over authority, the pluralist theorists believe that the process of achieving the optimum levels of integration of different interests would be perpetual and inevitable. They also believe that the developing of institutions best able to accommodate varied interests, would be achieved with different degrees of success at different times, and therefore different levels of tension, conflict and disorder will inevitably accompany this process.

Following from that, Dahrendorf based his understanding of inequality not on economical, but on political and social causes (i.e. power and authority relationships within a society). According to Dahrendorf, some people must have more power than others to ensure enforcement of cultural norms, a consensus and wellbeing of the whole society. And, therefore, Dahrendorf considered attempts to minimise or eliminate inequality as unrealistic and even dangerous.

This idea of the enforced consensus is known as the Liberal Paradox: to allow the majority of citizens to live in relative peace and order, the state should be able to use force to preserve this peace and order. (Department of Criminology (2004) MSc/Postgraduate Diploma by Distance Learning, Course Handbook)

The history of riots in Britain in the 20th century provides multiple and heterogeneous reasons behind the high level of disorder and unrest: i.e. economical, social, political, cultural and psychological. And to a certain extent, even ‘enforcing the consensus’ with the aim of protecting and preserving public order (i.e. Brixton 1981), acted as a spark that ignited the riot.

The sociological scientific theories presented in this essay by conflict (Marx and Webber), consensus (Durkheim), and pluralist tradition (Dahrendorf) provide a basis for the understanding of broad and complex perspectives of public order.

The above mentioned theorists form just the tip of the iceberg of modern sociology comprising

social, political, psychological, cultural and other academic disciplines and relevant theories, which look at the complex phenomenon of public order through the prism of the nature of human society and the individuals forming it.

The above mentioned sociological scientific theories offered a generalised explanation of some features of human nature and human society, whilst rejecting or ignoring the others. But the truth is, that:

'Single factor, or univariate, sociological explanations of public disorder are inadequate in themselves to explain such a complex social phenomenon. Nevertheless, some univariate explanations may be usefully applied in combination with complementary variables to produce a more comprehensive multivariate explanation.'

(Department of Criminology (2004) MSc in Community Safety, Module 1. 5-25)

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