



Fig. 1. The riots hit Moss Side. Police on duty outside the post office on Princess Road on Wednesday night after the mob had smashed the windows', *Manchester Evening News*, 10 July 1981.

## HISTORY AT LARGE

### Photojournalism and the Moss Side Riots of 1981: Narrowly Selective Transparency

by Shirin **Hirsch** and David **Swanson**

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#### INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1981 a series of disturbances broke out across England. The riots, disruptions or uprisings, as they have been variously called, shook Thatcher's Britain to the very core, powerfully revealing a segment of society in revolt that had hitherto been marginalized and excluded.<sup>1</sup> The media responded with alarm, portraying a mindless and criminal 'mob'. 'To think this is England', exclaimed a front-page headline of the tabloid *Sun*, with an image of police under attack, desperately attempting to protect themselves with riot shields.<sup>2</sup> The front page of the *Manchester Evening News* proclaimed a 'looting blitz in Moss Side' and 'streets of blind fury'.<sup>3</sup> The response of both government and police corresponded to the panic-stricken

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Manchester Metropolitan University;  
People's History Museum  
University of Manchester

S.Hirsch@mmu.ac.uk  
David.swanson@manchester.ac.uk

depictions of a 'crazed mob' in the media. On the second day of the Moss Side disruptions (Wednesday 8 July) the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester police, James Anderton, told a press conference the purported rioters were displaying 'near anarchy and lunacy'.<sup>4</sup>

Such hostile representations drew on a longer ideological response to modern riots under capitalism. The great historian of crowds, George Rudé, traced these ideological motifs from as early as the Gordon riots of 1780, in which the purported rioters were portrayed as criminal elements, intent on causing violent disorder through attacks on private property, with no deeper motivation than the drive to loot and destroy.<sup>5</sup> Such narratives provide a concerted concealment: when disruptive events are framed as both meaningless and mindless, the social, economic and political conditions under which they take place are hidden. Yet as Rudé argued, borrowing an expression from the American sociologist Charles Tilly, the act of riot is surely 'an extension of politics by other means'.<sup>6</sup>

A small but significant literature exists on the 1980–81 disruptions, in which the most recent work, by Simon Peplow, draws convincingly on archival material as well as oral histories to recover significant meaning behind the events.<sup>7</sup> In these studies written sources are relied on heavily while visual sources are almost completely overlooked. Yet visual sources can be particularly useful in situations where participation is brief, organizationally unstructured and criminalized. Photography of the 1981 riots allows acknowledgement of 'race' when in contemporary written accounts its existence is denied. For example, the front page of the *Manchester Evening News* after the first day of the Moss Side riots quoted Anderton proclaiming that this was 'not a race riot'; and 'race' and racism do not figure in the paper's reports and analysis.<sup>8</sup> But the photographs published with these accounts reveal elements of the disturbances that have been erased from the written records.

This article explores the Moss Side riots and their extension of politics. We discuss a series of photographs published in the local newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News*, reporting on the Moss Side riots (7–9 July 1981). These photographs are powerful sources for insights on the disruptions. Yet as documents they are not passive or inert; they do not directly reveal what people in the past experienced: in this essay we present them as active commentaries by their makers.<sup>9</sup> We draw from Susan Sontag here, who wrote that photographs possess a 'visual code', creating a grammar and an ethics of seeing.<sup>10</sup> Photographs alter, enlarge and restrict our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. In this sense the photojournalism of riots serves both to represent their history, and to reflect and sharpen the ideological framework through which they are understood. As Bill Schwarz argues in his exploration of photography and the civil rights movement, such media representations are constitutive of a wider political struggle.<sup>11</sup>

We begin our essay with a theoretical discussion on the dynamics of such photography, and on the tensions intrinsic to the form. We then outline a brief history of the riots, before turning to the *Manchester Evening News* photographs of Moss Side disturbances. We analyse the images both collectively and individually on the basis of what has been selected to be shown and why, and what has been excluded. The photographs offer a window on these days, but while the window appears clear, its framing is determined by significant power relations shaping what we can and cannot see. As we grapple with what these sources can tell us as historians, we hope that in a closer reading of them we can begin to understand such relics of disorder as partial and highly political sources that reveal as much of the Moss Side summer riots as they hide – and as they reveal through what they hide.

### PHOTOGRAPHY AS NEWS: A CONTRADICTION

There is a contradiction at the heart of photography. On the one hand photography provides what feels like a very direct representation of reality as we experience it. Although only in two dimensions, it can make the viewer feel almost present in the moment photographed. On the other hand photographs are highly subjective. They can be art even, but at all times they represent a very particular selection of experience. Susan Sontag refers to this objective/subjective contradiction as photography's 'narrowly selective transparency'.<sup>12</sup> This is a perspective echoed by John Berger who argues that despite their transparency, there is a built-in ambiguity to photographs. This ambiguity lies not in the instant of the photograph (which is essentially indisputable) but in that instant's wrenching from the normal flow of experience which provides its meaning, compared to a memory from our own lives. Because of this discontinuity, what the photograph shows goes with any story one chooses to invent'.<sup>13</sup> Thus the objectivity of photographs is confronted with two subjectivities – that involved in the narrow selection which leads to the photograph, and that of the viewer and interpreter of the photo. Two world-views meet in the objective instant.

Photojournalism, perhaps more than any other form of photography, since its beginnings in the mid nineteenth century has emphasized and asserted for itself one side of the photographic contradiction, that of objectivity. As early as 1850, journalist Adolphe Joanne demanded, 'Would a denial of the daguerreotype not be a denial of light itself? Show me the man foolish enough not to believe in the sun and its works!'.<sup>14</sup> Despite a rich history of photographic manipulation, from the erasing of Trotsky under Stalin's rule to the routine beautification of models today, press photography still generally retains this aura of reliability.<sup>15</sup> 'Fake news' has become a frequent cry, yet such denunciations are not often aimed at newspaper photographs. When in 2014 a Pulitzer award-winning photographer manipulated a photo of the Syrian war by removing the lens of a video camera which had appeared in a corner of the frame, the Associated Press

dropped the photographer, showing the importance of the reputation for objectivity in the industry.<sup>16</sup>

One indicative product of the seeming objectivity of press photography, or at least the desire for it to be seen as neutral, is the downplaying of the role of individual press photographers. One study of five 'elite' Western newspapers found that levels of attribution for photographers lagged ten to forty years behind that of written journalism.<sup>17</sup> The first attribution for photography in each of the five newspapers occurred between thirty and fifty years after photographs became routine in newspapers around the 1930s. By the 1960s and 1970s attribution was more frequent but usually for the employing organization rather than the individual photographer.<sup>18</sup> By 1981, the year of the Moss Side riots, individual authorship by photographers had begun to be more respected. Even so, it was still uneven. For example, in the *Manchester Evening News* coverage of the riots in 1981, if more than one photographer's work was shown, the photographs were still collectively rather than individually attributed. The now general acceptance that news photographs are individually authored further reinforces one side of photography's contradiction, that is, the subjective and the narrowly selective. It confirms that something is going on in news photography beyond the narrow mechanical reflection of reality.

The narrow selection which shapes news photographs goes well beyond the subjective choices of the individual photographer, however. Most important of the influences on selection is the societal role of newspapers in manufacturing consent. This process shapes what counts as news, how that news will be interpreted for the reader/viewer, and therefore what type of photos may or may not fit with that interpretation.<sup>19</sup> At times such shaping can be very conscious and explicit, as for instance in the strict media guidelines which arose from the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965, but more often it is unconscious and routinized into production processes.<sup>20</sup>

Despite these pressures and the interests through which photographs are created, images of riots cannot be simply invented from thin air. A photograph of a riot always leaves what Berger and Mohr describe as 'traces' of objective realities.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, while photographers, editors or publishers can have clear intentions on how images should be read, that does not necessarily determine the meaning. Viewers bring their own history of experience and beliefs, attitudes and understandings. The transparency of the photograph can therefore be read in different ways in relationship with the image, depending on the narrative or worldview of the viewer, and competing narratives can contest the meaning of a photograph. Viewers are 'active audiences', although such readings are necessarily constrained by the power and influences of those who create and publish such images.<sup>22</sup> Drawing attention to the processes of narrow selection and particularly how that selection comes about can help us to see what is missing and illuminate other ways of seeing what is there. To explore this through the photojournalism of the Moss Side riots, we first outline a history of the riots.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE 1980–81 RIOTS

The riots that swept across England between 1980 and 1981 were part of a connected phenomenon, all beginning in urban areas after ‘trigger events’ involving police and black Britons.<sup>23</sup> Under a Thatcher government, this was a period of high unemployment, particularly for the young, in inner-city areas and racism framed the experience of unemployment. Gus John was a significant figure in Moss Side at the time as a community activist and youth worker, having arrived in the UK from the Caribbean in the 1960s. He recalls of working in Moss Side that:

... the two things that stuck out for me were, first, lots of young people coming out of school and being unemployed for a long time... The second thing that was obvious was the way in which the police operated within the community – they tended to see black people as exotic... and generally formed the impression that the older people were safe and sound: they shared commonly held values, they were disciplinarians keeping the children under control, and it was really the youth which were at odds with the establishment, and the police as the most visible arm of the establishment.<sup>24</sup>

The Moss Side Defence Committee, established to support those arrested in relation to the disturbances, documented the constant harassment of youths by the police.<sup>25</sup>

These were issues which were replicated in many inner city areas of England. The ‘sequence of antagonisms’, however, was by no means uniform and as Paul Gilroy stressed, significant local circumstances influenced each specific eruption.<sup>26</sup> Fourteen months before the events in Moss Side, riots erupted in the St Paul’s area of Bristol. Here, police raided a black cafe and attempted to make an arrest. A crowd gathered and soon the police were retreating from the area under a hail of broken bricks. For several hours they did not dare return as shops were looted and buildings were burnt out. Bristol, as Chris Harman noted, was the shape of things to come.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, twelve months elapsed before the next big riot in early April 1981, in Brixton. The extent of the disturbances here was even greater than in Bristol, with petrol bombs used on a much wider scale, a bus hijacked then driven into police lines, dozens of cars and pubs burnt out and scores of shops looted. Order was restored only after thousands of police were brought in.<sup>28</sup> Minor disruptions took place across England after Brixton, especially with crowds of youth attending funfairs in London, but it was not until July that more serious rioting began again. The biggest confrontation was in Toxteth, Liverpool when police tried to arrest a black youth who they claimed had stolen the motor-bike he was riding. A crowd rescued him, but another black youth, whose family had been subject to a campaign of police harassment, was seized. The next evening rioting erupted on a huge scale. Barricades were built with overturned cars and scores of petrol bombs were

thrown at the police. The following night the streets were barricaded again, and a fleet of milk floats and a concrete mixer were seized by rioters who drove at the police lines, forcing the 800 police officers to retreat. Several buildings were torched, and with the area clear of police, looting began: reportedly, middle-aged women, white and black, queued with shopping trolleys to loot supermarkets. By the next night police reinforcements were recruited from as far away as Manchester and the authorities were finally able to regain control of the Toxteth area.<sup>29</sup> 5

No sooner had the public tensions of Toxteth began to settle than Moss Side, Manchester, erupted. What started these riots is still disputed. According to the government-supported Hytner Report rival gangs competed as to who could start a riot first.<sup>30</sup> Other reports, however, claim that police officers had shouted insults at a group of mainly black youths who were leaving a club in Moss Side, and a brick was thrown through the window of a nearby clothes shop.<sup>31</sup> Shops were then set on fire, while rioters held police at bay with petrol bombs. Reporting the first night of the Moss Side Riots, *The Times* alleged general agreement that the disturbances were not on the scale of either Toxteth or Brixton.<sup>32</sup> Yet the following day groups began to gather on street corners, and by late that evening a crowd of over a thousand had gathered outside the local police station and attempted to 'storm their way inside'.<sup>33</sup> Most of its windows were smashed and police vehicles outside were attacked before the crowd onslaught was finally repelled. Failing to penetrate the police station the crowd turned to burning and looting shops and hundreds of black and white youths were involved in building barricades and throwing petrol bombs. The following night the police took their revenge: according to the *Financial Times* 'police swamped the Moss Side area. Vans swept about carrying teams of the Tactical Action Group... police swooped on any potential gathering of people, white or black, and made any necessary arrests'.<sup>34</sup> There were three times as many arrests on this night of very low level rioting as on the previous two nights combined.<sup>35</sup> And while the police reaction provoked bitter animosity in the local population, it also succeeded in stopping the disturbances. 10 15 20 25 30

#### NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE MOSS SIDE RIOTS:

##### *MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS*

The riots in Moss Side were reported on by a range of local and national mainstream media outlets. Media photographers within this were by no means neutral actors within these disruptions. While police were the key target of anger within all of the riots, camera operators and media photographers were also reported on as victims of intentional violence, perhaps because the function of such film could also be later used by the police.<sup>36</sup> This antagonism towards media photographers can also be found in court records; Mrs Helen Camillieri, thirty-three, from Hulme in Manchester, was given a three-month jail sentence, suspended for a year, by Manchester 35 40



magistrates. She admitted to 'swearing at press photographers and policemen' during the rioting on Princess Road, Moss Side.<sup>37</sup>

The Moss Side riots ran for three nights from Tuesday 7th of July 1981 and were thus reported on in issues of the *Manchester Evening News* from Wednesday to Friday that week. We explored three issues for each day, although only the first and second issues each day showed significant differences in the photographs used, with some photos generally being added to the second edition and others omitted. Over the three days altogether forty-six photographs directly related to the riots were printed: thirteen on 8 July, nineteen on the 9th and fourteen on the 10th (see Appendix for full table of date, issue, photographic content and caption for all photos).

A large proportion of the total photographs (41.3%) focus on damaged buildings and other property. Arguably these photos illustrate the impact of the riot most dramatically for readers but they also indicate what is seen as important. If lives are damaged through poverty and racism this is less newsworthy, but when property is damaged it earns illustration – in nineteen photographs over three days. On the first day of reporting, after the first night of the riots, the percentage of photos dedicated to buildings is at its peak. This photographic focus can be explained in part because the remnants of material destruction were far easier to capture than the rapid movement of rioters. However the almost complete absence of the riot itself persists to a large extent over the next two days, when an emphasis on buildings is replaced by an emphasis on people. Who those people are tells its own story.

Of the photos which show people, the police feature centrally in more than a third (39%). This dominance tells us something about what message is being offered. It also tells us where photographers are mainly situated – behind police lines – and suggests that the newspaper's perspective is likely to be closely aligned with that of the police, who are presented as society's protectors.

Given that Manchester then, as now, was politically dominated by the Labour Party, it is also interesting that the local paper only has space for photographs of politicians on the right of the political spectrum, with photographs of Enoch Powell and three different photographs of the Conservative Home Secretary Mr Whitelaw on tour in Moss Side, meeting and shaking hands with two white residents, as well as police officers and Chief Constable James Anderton. The rest of the photographs which include people depict those suffering from the riots, those helping to overcome the damage done, those calling for an end to the rioting, and a retired major who dispersed a crowd of twenty rioters just by talking to them. In these statistics we can see the 'narrow selection' of photojournalism at work. Much is excluded, particularly the riots themselves, any reasons for their occurrence, and the perspective of those rioting. Awareness of this narrow selection can help us read the photographs in an alternative way to that intended (and what was intended is often made even clearer by their captions). Only thirteen percent of the total photographs show purported rioters. And it is in these rare

Table 1. A breakdown of the focus of the *Manchester Evening News* photos

Subject of photo	Date published			Total
	8 July	9th	10th	
Damaged property without people	6	4	0	10
Damaged property with people	3	3	3	9
People	4	12	11	27
<b>Total photos</b>	13	19	14	46

Table 2. A breakdown of the people who feature in the *Manchester Evening News* photos, 8–10 July 1981.

Who is the main focus?	Date			Total
	8 July	9 July	10 July	
Police	2	3	7	12
Conservative and other right-wing politicians	1	1	3	5
Purported rioters	0	3	1	4
Fire/ambulance	2	2	0	4
Owners of damaged property	0	1	2	3
Religious figures	0	3	0	3
Police <i>and</i> purported rioters	0	2	0	2
Bystanders	1	0	1	2
Vigilantes	1	0	0	1

examples that a very different perspective on the riots can be discerned. The photographs which follow are objective representations of instances that occurred over the three days of the riots. What they show, however, depends very much on your perspective.

THE DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY

The front page of the *Manchester Evening News* on 9 July 1981 shows a row of shops burning. The caption beneath reads: ‘Like a scene of horror from Dante’s *Inferno*. . . smoke from the blazing shop billows over riot torn Moss Side early today’. This inferno is given further visual representation in a series of photographs in the *Manchester Evening News*. The destruction of these shops was not only convenient for photographers in its semi-permanent materiality. It also fed into a political narrative in which the destruction of private property was, in its very essence, an attack on quint-essential values of English capitalism, the riots positioned as the very antithesis to common-sense values of business. The photographic scenes of shop fronts and chaos served this narrative, picturing the ‘mob’ and their role in the destabilization of the nation.

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The map published by the *Manchester Evening News* on Thursday 8 July (Fig. 1) indicates damage to shops on Princess Road. Their report claimed that more than 100 shops were ‘ransacked’ there and on nearby Claremont Road and Wilmslow Road.<sup>38</sup> It should be noted, however, that not all shops situated in this area were attacked.

For example, ‘Murray’s Music City’ on Princess Road, ‘supplying the greatest reggae selection this side of Kingston’ and run by the well-respected music collector Duke Murray and his son, remained unscathed during the Moss Side Riots.<sup>39</sup> The photographs do not show this shop nor any other left untouched. In this sense, what is and is not captured by *Manchester Evening News* photographers is highly selective. The series of photographs focusing on shop destruction creates a sense of random and meaningless violence in association with a mindless ‘mob’ mentality, and a narrative of chaos is built up through particular shots. You can see this in Figure 2, which shows us seven police officers standing outside a smashed-up post office. The *Manchester Evening News* caption lets us know that the ‘mob had smashed the windows’.

We don’t see the mob, however. Perhaps we are to visualize their mob-like appearance in relation to the evidence of destruction the photograph shows us. Is it easier to imagine evil than to be shown it in human form? The post office is a nostalgic ruin, a remnant of a provincial little England. Inside amidst the destruction you can still see shelf signs for postcards of England. The window sign remains with the words ‘Congratulations Prince Charles and Princess Diana’ and celebratory union jack bunting. The contrast is clear; the police are there to protect not just the property of the post office but the very essence of an imaginary England against a formless mob.

Figure 3 shows a more expansive picture of Reid’s Butchers. The shop-front window has been smashed and the shelves emptied. Near the door is an egg basket, with most of the eggs taken. The white from a cracked egg is seeping out and spreads across the pavement. It looks dramatic, like a crime scene, yet the photograph also reveals a prosaic element to the riots. We can assume from this shot that food was looted from the shop, including eggs and meat. While the intention of the photograph may then be to show danger and chaos, a different meaning can also be garnered, relating to poverty, food and riots. The court-case reports too disclose mundane motives. The crime reporter for *The Times* listed a number of convictions in the days following the Moss Side riots; in a typical case two teenage boys from Whalley Range (bordering Moss Side), both unemployed, one black and one white, were each fined £75 for handling packets of stolen biscuits.<sup>40</sup>

Most of the photographs show damaged property without people. One, for example, shows a clothes-rail in rubble on a burnt floor with a white mannequin standing to one side. Others home in on burnt vehicles, including a motor-bike, where the focus is solely on the object and the damage done. When people figure, they are often peripheral to the objects, and are presented as on the ‘right’ side; they complement the object as subjects evoking



Fig. 2. The *Manchester Evening News* map of the second day of rioting, *Manchester Evening News*, 8 July 1981.

sympathy from the audience. In Figure 4, for example, two white people are shown looking over a burnt out car, the woman searching through burnt-out possessions in the boot of the car. The photograph gives the impression they are a couple and the car is theirs; the caption gives their full names and ages, as well as the make of the car.

In another photograph we see a white man in a shirt, Ron Wooton, opening his shirt shop and moving the barriers away from the window. The opening-up contrasts again with the actions of the rioters; Wooton is positioned as a hero, the businessman who tries to carry on selling shirts (and respectability) to the public. In all of these photographs, the victims are white and their full names are given in the captions. Such details humanize their role in the photograph, framing them in a sympathetic way, in contrast to the portrayal of the 'mob'.

#### PURPORTED RIOTERS

The original caption for Figure 6 reads, 'A jeweller's shop, despite its iron grill protection, is a prime target for looters. This dramatic picture shows wreckers at work on Robert Paul's shop in Princess Road'. However there is no evidence in the photograph of 'wreckers at work'. The shop has clearly been looted, but not necessarily by anyone in the photo. The two people



**Fig. 3. 'Broken windows and a basket of eggs thrown on the pavement outside Reid's Butchers along Princess Road', *Manchester Evening News*, 8 July 1981.**

closest to where the metal grill protecting the windows has been prised loose seem to be watching something in the distance, or perhaps waiting for a friend to catch up. The person near the still protected door seems also to be waiting, but shows no intent toward the shop. A nearby youth (front, in white jacket) walking past the shop is far enough away to imply no interest. Behind him, an older man, in more respectable clothes, is also walking by, and is the only one to look toward the window. His presence suggests a lack of a sense of threat in the situation, at least from the others in the photograph. A small crowd are moving away. One is calling out cheerfully, perhaps to a friend. Among the crowd there are no clear signs of weapons, or implements that would have helped raid the store, or any sign of goods that have been taken.

The hanging around that we see in the photograph corresponds with the court reports in the immediate days following the riot, where many were charged with 'obstruction' rather than any form of looting. Three of these cases provide further empirical detail, adding to what is visible in the photograph. An unemployed white girl aged seventeen told the court she had just been standing on a corner near her home in Moss Side watching the trouble when the police tried to move her on: she was fined £25 for obstruction. Similarly, a black fireman from Stockport in his twenties was remanded on



Fig. 4. 'Mike Gates, 35, and Francis [sic] Horn, 40, return to their Austin Allegro in Claremont Road, Rusholme, to find it a burned out wreck', *Manchester Evening News*, 9 July 1981.



Fig. 5. 'Blazing barricades ominously light the scene of the riots', *Manchester Evening News*, 9 July 1981.



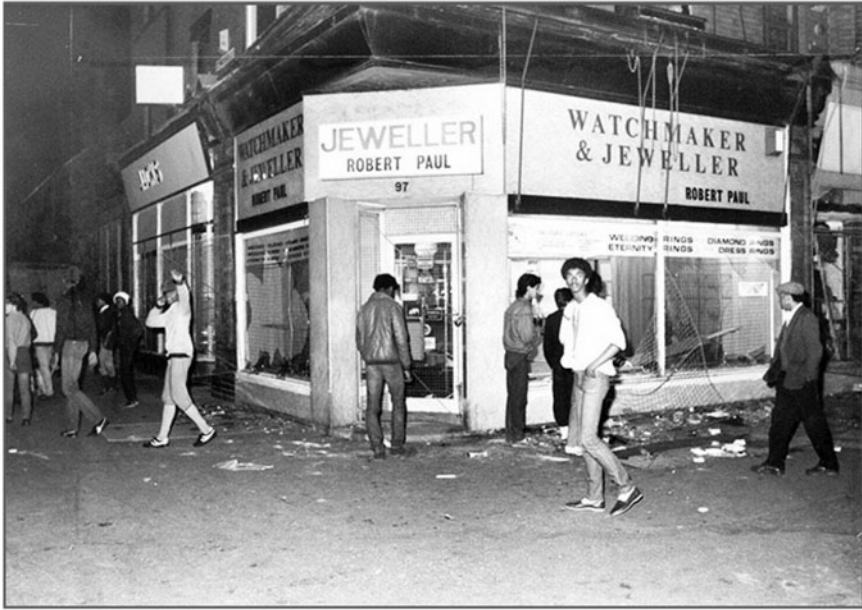


Fig. 6. 'A jeweller's shop, despite its iron grill protection, is a prime target for looters. This dramatic picture shows wreckers at work on Robert Paul's shop in Princess Road', *Manchester Evening News*, 9 July 1981.

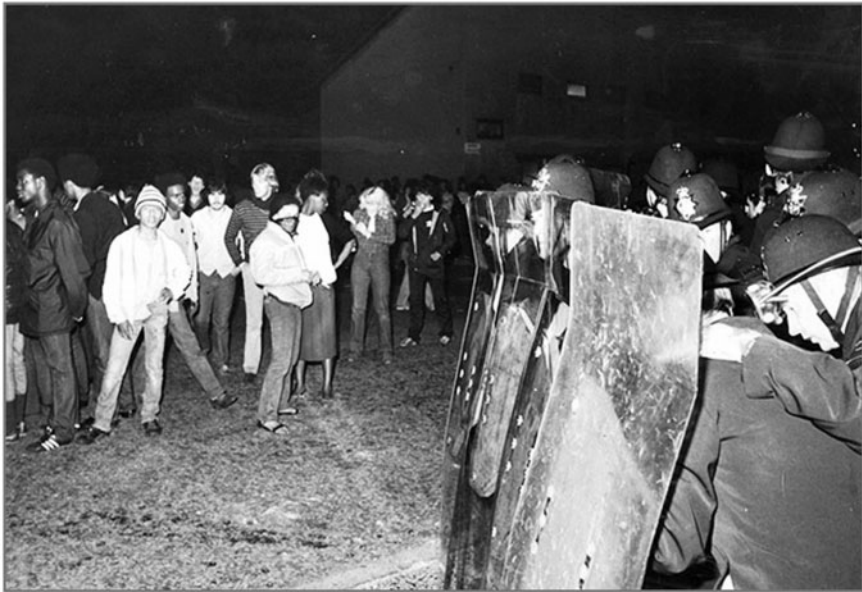


Fig. 7. Close encounters of a dangerous kind... Youths, one of them masked, menace police who are sheltering behind their riot shields. Some of the youths taunted the officers and from the rear of the crowd bricks were thrown. *Manchester Evening News*, 9 July 1981.

bail for obstruction. An unemployed white boy from Old Trafford, aged seventeen, was fined £75 after the court was told he shouted abuse at the police and would not move on.<sup>41</sup>

Undoubtedly though, the store in this photograph had been looted, and testimonies of local residents at the time provide insight as to the motivations of those involved by showing a clear dislocation between the shops targeted and the local youth. Martell Prince was a young black man in Moss Side in 1981 involved in the riots. He noted thirty years later in the documentary ‘I Predict a Riot’:

As far as we were concerned they weren’t our shops. People who had these businesses in Moss Side, who, when you went in these shops would abuse you. You know, like you’d go into the Jewellery store they’d be like ‘what do you want?’, we’d be like ‘why you got a jewellery store here then?’ you know what I mean?<sup>42</sup>

## CONFRONTATIONS

The original *Manchester Evening News* caption for Figure 7, from the second night of rioting, was a long one:

Close encounters of a dangerous kind. . . Youths, one of them masked, menace police who are sheltering behind their riot shields. Some of the youths taunted the officers and from the rear of the crowd bricks were thrown.

Again the caption does not seem to match what we see. Instead we see a mixed crowd of youth, black and white (unlike the police), some smiling. The crowd look relaxed and indifferent and no weapons are being held. A girl fiddles with her watch or cuff, a boy smokes a cigarette, another looks at the camera bemused. If we had cropped out the police this could easily be mistaken for the back of a crowd at a music festival. Indeed, an observer interviewed by the Moss Side Defence Committee noted that on the second day of the riots the ‘atmosphere was like a carnival’.<sup>43</sup> A study interviewing participants during the Bristol riots also found participants describing the events in terms of pleasure, joy and freedom. ‘It was lovely, I felt free’, one participant said. Another recalled: ‘People were so warm – they said “glad to be with you brother”, and put their arm around you’.<sup>44</sup>

In this photograph, close inspection of the ‘masked menace’ mentioned in the caption shows instead someone wearing a fashion headband and a pair of glasses. The unorganized nature of the night and the confidence given by strength in numbers, combined with the fact they are simply outdoors with others in their own community, perhaps sustains this more relaxed and unmasked approach. Which side of this photo looks the more threatening place to be? Should the viewer want to be behind the police lines, like the news photographer? Or could you more easily imagine being among the crowd?



Figure 7 and Figure 8 are the only two images which show police and (purported) rioters together. For Figure 8 the caption-writer again took pains to get across what we are meant to take from this image:

A policeman with his baton drawn stands alongside an unconscious youth near a police van in a Moss Side street. The youth was injured during an incident when a gang of thirty were attacking a line of policemen with rocks and missiles. Suddenly the line of police parted and a van spread through toward the youths.

Despite the long caption, we have not been informed as to why the youth is now on the ground looking injured. This photograph is unusual compared to the other images of police in that the photojournalist seems to have surprised the police officer and is facing the police head on, rather than being behind their lines. The white police officer looks startled and in motion, in contrast to the still body of a black youth on the ground. We are assured, as with Figure 7, that the youths were to blame as here they were 'throwing rocks and missiles'. But given the press identification with the police perspective, how much faith can be put in the described order of events here? We are told that the youth is unconscious, and that a police van drove toward the youths. Did the van hit the youth, or did the police jump out and knock him to the ground? Either way, why does the caption avoid telling us the details of what was probably witnessed by the photographer? There is only one clearly violent and armed presence in this photograph and that is the police officer.

### THE POLICE

Almost half the people we see in the photographs are police, demonstrating their central role in the riots. All the officers we see are white. They are all heavily equipped, with long protective shields, riot helmets, leather gloves and batons. They are often photographed in large groups together, and they contrast with the everyday environment in which they are active. In Figure 9 we see an open-top police van patrolling a street. Three officers stand in the back and two more sit in front. In the background local youths in ordinary clothes stand around watching The police, with their helmets and black uniforms, are in vehicles. (Manchester police in this riot were the first in Britain to deploy crash-helmet style riot headwear and to adapt the Northern Ireland tactic of using vehicles to break up crowds.) According to one study fifty-four vans swept through Moss Side charging at crowds with their back doors hanging open.<sup>45</sup> An observer interviewed for the Moss Side Defence Committee noted that on the Thursday of the riots

[Moss Side] felt like part of Belfast – occupied territory, with the police systematically and indiscriminately attacking anyone they could get their hands on. The invasion, complete with dozens of black white and green



**Fig. 8.** A policeman with his baton drawn stands alongside an unconscious youth near a police van in a Moss Side street. The youth was injured during an incident when a gang of thirty were attacking a line of policemen with rocks and missiles. Suddenly the line of police parted and a van spread through toward the youths, *Manchester Evening News*, 9 July 1981.



Fig. 9. 'A police van patrolling the riot-torn area of Moss Side', *Manchester Evening News*, 10 July 1981

police vans racing down side streets, produced 150 arrests, many of them bystanders, numerous broken bones and bruised kidneys, even children run over by vans.<sup>46</sup>

According to the official Hytner Report into the riot, 'many of the policemen in Moss Side in vehicles. . . were actively spoiling for trouble with young blacks. There was evidence of police vans touring the area with officers leaning out of the back shouting racial insults at black youths and taunting them to come and fight'.<sup>47</sup> In a letter to the *Guardian* eleven community workers wrote that the police had acted as 'uniformed hooligans' during this tour, 'beating their truncheons against their vehicles and chanting slogans such as "Niger nigger nigger, oi oi oi"'.<sup>48</sup> None of this is revealed in either the photograph or the caption. Figure 9 gives the impression of a warlike encounter, although one side is protected, alert and militarized while the other side looks disorganized and almost relaxed.

Most of the police officers photographed in this series are not identified; we view them through their employment role rather than as individuals. The photograph of Chief Constable James Anderton is an exception. Anderton headed the Greater Manchester Police between 1975 and 1991 and was arguably Britain's best known policeman, attracting national attention for his outspoken views.<sup>49</sup> In the *Manchester Evening News* photograph he becomes

the story itself, rather than one component of it. As he calls for 'heavy policing' in response to the 'hooligans and criminals', Anderton sits behind a table of 'weapons', holding an axe and posing for the cameras. The caption tells us Anderton is briefing 'newsmen' at Platt Lane police station. He tells the press that the rioters used 'a kind of military strategy' and insists 'I personally cannot believe this was within the intelligence and capacity of the young people involved to plan an operation on this scale'.<sup>50</sup> 5

In the caption, we are told the weapons 'seized by the police' from the riots are those on display in front of Anderton in the photograph, what the *Manchester Evening News* caption describes as a 'gruesome display of weapons'. A closer look at the objects, however, does not necessarily fit the theory of organized conspiracy behind the riots. On the table we can see two garden forks, a spade, a hammer, some sticks and string. The weapons hardly evoke those possessed by violent and organized criminals. Anderton positions himself here as the strong man ready to take on the violent mob of the Moss Side riots. In later years, Anderton would gain the nickname of 'god's copper', having stated that he might be a prophet with a direct line to God.<sup>51</sup> This photograph is clearly staged to show Anderton as powerful and in control of the city, but it could also be viewed as a shot of a slightly deranged man next to a strange assortment of gardening tools. 10 15 20

## CONCLUSION

This article has drawn out tensions inherent in the representations of the riot through what Berger and Mehr describe as the natural ambiguity of photographic images.<sup>52</sup> The riots of 1981 were viewed by the British state with intense alarm, as threatening the stability of society and a 'natural' order. News of the events spread rapidly, and they were discussed across the country. In an ideological offensive waged by the state and the press, the 'rioters' were presented as an enemy within and a threat to ordinary people. Photographs played a key role in framing this narrative in the media. The ideology was sometimes imposed consciously, but at other times these framings were less explicit. 25 30

In our examination of contemporary photographs of the Moss Side riots in the *Manchester Evening News* we have tried to trace 'contradictory imprints' in the image.<sup>53</sup> We have seen what was selected to be shown and why, and what was intended to be taken from the photographs (an intention often made explicit and reinforced by captions). Thus we see portrayed a dehumanized mob intent on criminal violence, primarily through images of the damage done and those who would protect us from it. In recognizing what is presented and why, we can also understand what is excluded. Chief among those exclusions, given the portrayal of a frightening and irrational mob, are the reasons why the riots occurred – poverty, racism and oppressive policing. Through that realization we can see the humanity of those taking part. Also largely absent from the photographic record is actual rioting, in particular one of the key scenes of the Moss Side riots, the mass attack on 35 40

the local police station. Those images might have exposed too strongly for the media and police both the reasons behind the riots, and their collective nature.

But however narrowly selective news photography is, it is also transparent, and different subjectivities can meet in the objective instant. Once the photographs are approached from the perspective of what is left out, it is possible to discern what was excluded intentionally. We see in the purported rioters a crowd which is multi-racial, unarmed and unprotected, particularly when compared with the overwhelmingly white and heavily armed and protected police. We see a crowd in which a wide range of the local community seems to feel comfortable, and where defensive measures, are taken to protect that community from the police. From the components that made up their barricades, to the looting of baker and butcher shops, we see the poverty that helps motivate the riots. Although a photograph cannot convey the reported racist chanting of police, in the very whiteness of the force we see the societal racism which contributed to the emergence of the riot. Oppressive policing, the final factor, can also be discerned, most clearly in the image of a police officer with truncheon raised, standing over the still body of a black youth. In short, we see in the photographs both the reasons why the riots occurred and their nature as a collective response to those underlying causes, as a large section of the affected population rose up in both anger and solidarity. The *Manchester Evening News* pictures of the riots therefore provide not only an example of how the media, and photojournalism in particular, is used within such situations, but also an important testament to those who rose up against, and started to change, their oppression.

**Shirin Hirsch** is a historian based jointly at People's History Museum and Manchester Metropolitan University. She is the author of *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell: Race, Locality and Resistance* (Manchester University Press, 2018).

**David Swanson** works in mathematics education at the University of Manchester (UoM) and is the co-author of the forthcoming *Understanding Lesson Study for Mathematics: a Practical Guide for Improving Teaching and Learning* (Routledge, 2020). He is currently Branch President of UCU at UoM.

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**Appendix 1. All photos and captions directly related to the Moss Side riots printed in the *Manchester Evening News* from 8–10 July 1981.**

	Date and edition where first printed	Brief description	Original caption
1	8 July 1981 (1st edn)	Burned-out shops including florist	'Firemen damp down the embers of a blaze on Princess Road, Moss Side where shops were the target of wreckery.'
2	8 July 1981 (1st)	Two firemen spray destroyed building	As above (joint caption)
3	8 July 1981 (1st)	Damaged store window, sign on ground (Graham)	'The shattered remains of shops on Princess Road after the orgy of violence.'
4	8 July 1981 (1st)	Burned out 'Bowes'	'The burnt out inside of Bowes pawn-brokers and jewellers in Moss Side shopping centre. The remains of the petrol bomb that caused the damage and led to an orgy of burning and looting lies in front of the till.'
5	8 July 1981 (1st)	Police on motorbikes	'Police at the ready in Princess Road. Moss Side'
6	8 July 1981 (1st)	Wedding cake	'A smashed window in a bakery shop in Moss Side shopping centre with a dummy wedding cake still on display.'
7	8 July 1981 (1st)	Reid's Butchers	'Broken windows and a basket of eggs thrown on the pavement outside Reid's butchers along Princess Road.'
8	8 July 1981 (1st)	Anderton with press	'Chief constable Jim Anderton briefs newsmen at Platt Lane police station.'
9	8 July 1981 (2nd)	Damaged shops with people	'A pall of smoke rises from the rubble of three shops – Barry's outfitters, Meski's ice cream shop, and Frank's hairdressers – on Prince's Road, Moss Side, following today's troubles.'
10	8 July 1981 (2nd)	Jim Boswell	'Retired major on his way home intervened.'
11	8 July 1981 (2nd)	Stan Sorell	'Mr Stan Sorell' [Conservative MP]
12	8 July 1981 (2nd)	Fireman burning buildings	'A pall of smoke rises into the air as firemen desperately fight a series of shop blazes during today's Moss Side riots. Evening time's reader Christopher Reilly captured the scene with this dramatic picture of Princess Road at the height of the hour long

*Continued*

**Continued**

Date and edition where first printed	Brief description	Original caption
		orgy of violence. The firemen's task was made worse as rampaging mobs of youth hurled stones at these looted buildings.'
13 8 July 1981 (2nd)	Clothes rack burned	'Charred garments lie on the floor after rioters tried to start a fire in Apanet fashions in the Moss Side Centre.'
14 9 July 1981 (1st)	Burning shops	'Like a scene of horror from Dante's Inferno. . . smoke from a blazing shop billows over riot torn Moss Side early today.'
15 9 July 1981 (1st)	Minister	'Mr Schofield.'
16 9 July 1981 (1st)	Priest	'Father Sumner.'
17 9 July 1981 (1st)	Burning barricades	'Blazing barricades ominously light the scene of the riots.'
18 9 July 1981 (1st)	Line of police with shields	'The thin blue line. . . riot shield at the ready, a line of police waits for the order to move in to quell the Moss Side riots.'
19 9 July 1981 (1st)	Burning shop	'The wreckers moved on leaving another shop in Princess Road, Moss Side ablaze. This time Dicksons hardware store burns out of control until the police can clear a way for firemen.'
20 9 July 1981 (1st)	People and police with shields	'Close encounters of a dangerous kind. . . Youths, one of them masked, menace police who are sheltering behind their riot shields. Some of the youths taunted the officers and from the rear of the crowd bricks were thrown.'
21 9 July 1981 (1st)	People outside jewellers	'A jeweller's shop, despite its iron grill protection, is a prime target for looters. This dramatic picture shows wreckers at work on Robert Paul's shop in Princess Road.'
22 9 July 1981 (1)	Couple with their burned out car	'Mike Gates, 35, and Francis [sic] Horn, 40, return to their Austin Allegro in Claremont Road, Rusholme, to find it a burned out wreck.'
23 9 July 1981 (1)	Police looking at tree lopper	'Two policemen drafted in from Oldham examine a tree-lopper used as a weapon by the rioters.'
24 9 July 1981 (1)	Burned bike	'A burned out motorcycle at the kerbside in Claremont Road, Moss Side.'
25 9 July 1981 (1)		

*Continued*

**Continued**

	Date and edition where first printed	Brief description	Original caption
		Firemen putting out burning building	'The excited mob have now moved on to fresh targets and in their wake come firemen who fight to stop flames spreading from this hardware shop in Princess Road.'
26	9 July 1981 (2)	Police with baton over unconscious youth	'A policeman with his baton drawn stands alongside an unconscious youth near a police van in a Moss Side street. The youth was injured during an incident when a gang of thirty were attacking a line of policemen with rocks and missiles. Suddenly the line of police parted and a van spread through toward the youths.'
27	9 July 1981 (2nd)	Anderton with found weapons	'Chief Constable Jim Anderton pictured with some of the weapons seized by the police during last night's riots.'
28	9 July 1981 (2nd)	Religious woman near police	'Miraculously, her shield of prayer protects her. She escapes untouched by the night's riots, in which a number of policemen were injured. For her at least, prayer is answered.'
29	9 July 1981 (2nd)	Enoch Powell	No caption – headline: 'Worse to come, warns Powell'.
30	9 July 1981 (2nd)	Burning barricades	'Youngsters watch a burning barricade in Plainsfield Close, Moss Side.'
31	9 July 1981 (2nd)	Smashed ambulance	'The attacked ambulance, its shattered windscreen pushed through by Mr Astle, who drove it till he was temporarily blinded by blood.'
32	9 July 1981 (2nd)	Ambulance driver	'Blood spattered ambulance driver Roy Astle.'
33	10 July 1981 (1st)	Excavator clearing building	'An excavator clears the site of a burnt-out shop in Princess Road, Moss Side.'
34	10 July 1981 (1st)	Police outside post office	'The riots hit Moss Side. Police on duty outside the post office on Princess Road on Wednesday night after the mob had smashed the windows.'
35	10 July 1981 (1st)	Crowd at Moss Lane East	'Jeering youngsters throng Moss Lane East at midnight. Shortly afterwards they were dispersed by a large contingent of police.'
36	10 July 1981 (1st)	Police vans	

*Continued*

**Continued**

	Date and edition where first printed	Brief description	Original caption
37	10 July 1981(1st)	Quiet scene	'Police vans line Moss Lane East after officers scattered the mob.'
38	10 July 1981 (1st)	Woman with fruit	'The scene in Moss Lane East at 1 a.m. All was quiet after the police operation to clear the area. A lone figure surveys the deserted landscape,' 'Mrs Winifred McDermott lays out fruit in front of her boarded up corner store in Claremont Road, Rusholme, Manchester. Nearby is the wreck of her next-door neighbour's car.'
39	10 July 1981 (1st)	James Anderton	'James Anderton'
40	10 July 1981 (1st)	Gabriella Cox	'Gabriella Cox.' [Deputy chair of Greater Manchester police committee]
41	10 July 1981 (2nd)	Whitelaw tours	'Home Secretary Mr Whitelaw meets two residents during his Moss Side tour.'
42	10 July 1981 (2nd)	Whitelaw tours 2	'Mr Whitelaw accompanied by Chief Constable Jim Anderton in Moss Side today.'
43	10 July 1981 (3rd)	Whitelaw tours 3	'Mr Whitelaw shakes hands with a policeman saluting him upon his arrival at Manchester Town Hall today.'
44	10 July 1981 (3rd)	Police milling about	'The police pressure that kept the peace... at one of the isolated incidents in Moss Side during the night.'
45	10 July 1981 (3rd)	Police in open top van	'A police van patrolling the riot-torn area of Moss Side.'
46	10 July 1981 (3rd)	Shop owner	'It's business as usual for shopkeepers in Moss Side and Rusholme today.'

**ABSTRACT**

In the summer of 1981 a series of riots broke out across England. Here we look at the contemporary photojournalism of the Moss Side, Manchester, riots in the local newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News*, in order to better understand the riots and media representation of riots more generally. We begin by exploring the contradictory nature of photography (and news photography in particular) – what Susan Sontag refers to as photography's narrowly selective transparency. We then outline a brief history of the riots, before turning to examine photographs in the *Manchester Evening News* at the time. We analyse the images both collectively and individually on the basis of what has been selected to be shown and why, and what has been excluded. This perspective allows us then to see in the photographs themselves what was intended to be excluded, primarily the causes of the riots – poverty, racism and oppressive policing; and the humanity of those who took part.



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