RESEARCH ARTICLE

Solidarity Riots in the Diffusion of Collective Action: Doing Historical Research to Develop Theory in Social Psychology

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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that collective action events such as riots can influence the occurrence of further collective action events. However, the social influence process underlying such spread of events is unclear. The present paper examines competing explanations using historical case studies of two events in the 1831 wave of 'reform' protest and riots. Thick description of the events at Newport and Bath, using archive data, suggests that participants' psychological closeness to the riot city of Bristol motivated collective efforts to prevent troops from passing through their towns to put down the Bristol riots. The fact that the Newport and Bath collective action events involved personal risk in attempts to support rioters in another location can't easily be explained in terms of emulation and personal self-interest. Instead, we argue that where there is a common identity between people in different locations, solidarity may be one motive underlying the spread of riots. The discovery of a previously undocumented form of solidarity between participants at riot events contributes to new understandings of the diffusion of collective action in both historical studies and social psychology.

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Introduction

Collective action events such as protests and riots often spread in temporal or spatial clusters. But how and why does such spread happen? Some events occur independently of each other through a common grievance; and sometimes there is central coordination. But in waves of leaderless collective actions, events appear to influence each other spontaneously. Evidencing such influence is important in the evaluation of the extent to which participants see themselves as part of a politically conscious social movement (Myers & Przybysz, 2010). Addressing the question of social influence between events also answers calls to understand not just the predictors of collective action but the psychological effects of it (e.g., Louis, 2009).

Despite its relevance for social psychology, most previous research on the diffusion of collective action events has been carried out in other disciplines, mainly history and sociology. The current consensus in this research is that the process underlying spread is essentially one of learning and inspiration, as individuals apply a cost-benefit analysis to emulating behaviours from the other riot location (e.g., Aidt et al., 2022; Myers, 1997). However, this explanation is almost completely speculative. Therefore there is a need for a detailed empirical investigation of diffusion processes to understand how they occur psychologically. The present paper responds to this need through two case studies that examine the suggestion that one process through which collective action diffusion can operate is solidarity between locations based on common identity. The two case studies build upon recent advances in the social psychology of riot spread (Drury et al., 2020, 2022). Specifically, through case studies of the Bath and Newport riots of 1831, we use historiographic techniques to shed new light on the psychological question of social influence between collective action events.

Understanding the diffusion of collective action events in history and sociology

Interdependence of collective action events – i.e., events influencing each other -- has been investigated since Rudé's (1964) cartographic work on the 'Captain Swing' riots of 1830. His studies suggested that, in addition to the common grievances shared across the different locations, riots in one location influenced the likelihood of occurrence in further locations. Advances in understanding diffusion came with the advent of improved access to computers for mathematical modelling (Ball, 2012). Perhaps the most significant of these were made using a statistical approach called event history analysis. Thus examining data on the US urban 'race' riots 1961 to 1968, Myers (1997) demonstrated that previous rioting was a significant predictor of the hazard of rioting in a city even after all other predictors had been included (including grievances including wage and unemployment levels). Myers also demonstrated that severe riots were more influential than less intense incidents, and that influence decayed rapidly over time.

How did this diffusion process happen? The term 'contagion' is often found in the writings of historians, sociologists and others when discussing diffusion (e.g., Baudains et al., 2013b; Kucharski, 2020; Midlarsky, 1978; Myers, 1997, 2000). The

notion that behaviours spread easily and uncritically through a crowd, and that anyone ‘exposed’ is influenced (Le Bon, 1895), is now regarded as empirically discredited (Drury & Reicher, 2020). For complex phenomena like collective violence, most people ‘exposed’ do not join in (Reicher & Stott, 2011). Even for basic behavioural responses (such as emotion), there is evidence that prior beliefs shape and limit emulation (Parkinson, 2019).

Even where they use the term, most historians and sociologists studying riot diffusion say they reject the implication of mindlessness and pathology in the ‘contagion’ concept. Writing in the period after the advent of resource mobilisation theory, these authors seek to distance themselves from any Le Bonian associations.[1] Thus, some say that by the term ‘contagion’ they actually mean a different kind of explanation, which might be characterised as emulation via learning and inspiration among rational actors based on costs-benefits analysis (e.g., Aidt et al., 2022; Baudains et al., 2013a; Davies et al., 2013). Thus, Myers suggests that collective action events influence the occurrence of other collective action events through ‘a social learning process in which the favorable outcomes of others' collective behaviors provides a model for subsequent protests’ (Myers, 1997, p. 96; Myers & Przybysz, 2010, p. 64).

However, these explanations in terms of learning and rational choice are almost entirely speculative. The only empirical investigation of the psychological or subjective aspect of social influence process in the historical and sociological studies of riot diffusion that we are aware of is that of Bohstedt and Williams (1988). Their thick description of the spread of rioting in Devon in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century used witness accounts to provide some evidence of an inspiration process. By looking closely (through recorded utterances) at beliefs and attributions, Bohstedt and Williams (pp. 7-8) showed that people in new riot locations adopted what they believed worked, based on what other locations had done. However, the emulation process here was facilitated by a common moral economy between locations (Thompson, 1971). Without more extensive empirical investigation, we cannot have confidence that inspiration/learning is the only or typical process of social influence in a wave of riots, or that all riots in a cluster are based on cases of emulating others’ methods (i.e., to do ‘the same thing’) to obtain individual benefits in their own location.

New explanations of riot diffusion in social psychology

A recent series of studies of urban riots suggests that collective action events can spread via multiple social influence processes (Drury et al., 2020, 2022). The 2011 English riots began in Tottenham, London, two days after the fatal shooting by police of a local mixed-heritage man, Mark Duggan. Interview evidence from two of the riot locations suggested that participants felt empowered by the perceived defeat of a common outgroup – the police – in the previous riot locations. This, alongside the belief that other local people felt the same way, encouraged participation locally, representing a ‘strategic’ pathway of influence between locations.

There was also another influence process based on the social categorical relationship between people in different locations, based on their common history of those locations. Thus, some interviewees in Brixton were distressed and angered by the precipitating incident in Tottenham – the police killing of Mark Duggan – because they recognised the similarity to incidents of injustice in relation to their own historical position as Black people. Therefore, for them, retribution against the police was a significant motivation for local participation. There was evidence, therefore, that the Brixton riot

was driven by some participants' sense of how their community should act, representing a 'cognitive pathway' of social influence.

Doing historical research to develop theory in social psychology

The work of understanding the psychology of diffusion of collective action events is still in its early stages, and there is a need to test the different explanations offered above with a wider range of case studies. We argue that historical data and historical research methods offer a valuable opportunity to do this. There are precedents, as historical research has been important in the development of theories of crowd behaviour in psychology. Thompson's (1971) detailed study of the eighteenth century English food riots was crucial in showing exactly what is wrong with Le Bon's (1895) classical crowd psychology and in pointing to the need to explain the limits of behaviour in 'violent' crowd events (Drury & Reicher, 2020). More recently, historical events and archives have been used to develop crowd theory in other domains (e.g., Barr et al., 2022).

The present study is broadly in line with these precedents. It therefore offers both a historiographical analysis to develop a social psychological account of social influence between collective action events, and a novel historical study of riot spread through the use of social psychological theory. Our overall research question is *how did collective action events spread between locations in the wave of 'reform' riots in October 1831?* Specifically, we examine whether there is any evidence of social influence between locations that saw rioting and if so what the process was.

The present study

From October to December 1831, a wave of ~500 daily collective action events – including public meetings, peaceful protests, disturbances, and riots – swept across England after the rejection of the Second Reform Bill in the House of Lords. A wide range of progressive causes and aspirations were attached to the idea of 'reform' by many, and this was the basis of a significant campaign in that name across the country. As Innes (2022, p. 224) puts it, 'The word [reform] … connoted the rooting out of corruption and abuse… The favourite object of reform was Parliament: that is, the electoral system.' Therefore, there was hope invested in the Second Reform Bill, which was seen as a test case of support for (or opposition to) progressive causes.

The spread of the 'Reform riots' across some parts of the UK remains largely unexplained. Why did they occur when and where they did? What were the connections between these events, if any?

We carried out a series of case studies of events in the 1831 wave, focused on the previously neglected South-West, alongside an overview of the nature and sequence of all events in the overall wave, enabling some prima facie analytic claims about occurrence and process. In contrast to contemporary urban riots, rioters in 1830s England left little record of their perceptions, grievances, and motivations. For evidence, we therefore are reliant on whether witnesses recorded what was said, material culture (such as banners, flags, posters and flyers), and contemporaneous analysis of crowd objectives. Across the events, while interdependence could be inferred in some cases, evidence showing the process of social

influence was less common, therefore. However, in two of the case studies – Bath and Newport – we found evidence of an apparent solidarity motive linking local participation to the riot in nearby Bristol. Therefore, after summarising the survey, the analysis focuses on these two case studies.

Methods

Overall survey

The first stage of research was to survey the wave of events that occurred after the rejection of the Second Reform Bill in the House of Lords on 8 October 1831.[2] The data was collected primarily from contemporary newspapers, and Home Office reports on 'disturbances'. A three-month time span (1 October to 31 December 1831) was selected for scoping purposes and then after a significant amount of data was collected, confirmed as encompassing the wave of protest events.

The collection of data was carried out in three phases. First, a politically diverse selection of national newspapers was read in detail day by day for the three-month period to isolate reform-related collective action events. In the second phase, 149 regional newspapers were searched for terms relating to reform protest.

In the third phase, correspondence from county authorities to the Home Secretary concerning public order was surveyed, along with lists of reform meetings published in particular newspapers and a dataset giving locations where political unions had formed in the period.[3] This evidence was then used to inform searches amongst the local and national press, making phases two and three of the search process iterative. Where possible, cross-referencing between sources and multiple referencing was carried out to triangulate protest events.

The kinds of events that were relevant to the survey had to have a direct relationship to Parliamentary reform and involve collective action whether peaceful or violent. We categorised reform-related collective action events as either *protests* (non-violent public events), *disturbances* (minor violent event, minor damage, without yeomanry or military intervention or significant casualties) or *riots* (major violent event with significant damage to property, injury or loss of life, mass participation, significant duration, use of the Riot Act and intervention of yeomanry or military). The types of data collected for each collective action event included spatial and temporal characteristics, descriptions of the size and composition of crowds and the nature of the protest within an assigned typology.[4] The collective action event data was then collated chronologically.

Case studies

The methodology for the case studies was developed from that used to analyse events in the wave of riots in England in August 2011.[5] The principal feature of this approach is the use of triangulation of different sources to substantiate the timing, location, and content of a particular incident within an event.

There are essentially three types of written information available on riots and disturbances in the late modern period[6]: real-time accounts written *during* the events; *post-hoc* accounts by participants and eyewitnesses; and evidence of *physical* damage to property or violence to the person. The few real-time accounts for the two case studies presented here consisted of correspondence from county magistrates, military and yeomanry officers, to the Home Office or War Office in London. Some detailed accounts in the local newspapers were also clearly written from notes made by reporters who directly observed the events. Contemporary post-hoc accounts, which were far more common, appeared in official correspondence to central government, court documentation (witness depositions, prosecution briefs, and transcripts of court cases), newspaper reports, and in a military journal. Evidence of physical damage to property and thus targeting came from some of these sources but also more systematically from a claim for compensation.

Through directly cross-referencing these types of evidence and making reasoned assessments of the quantity and quality of the sources, confidence can be determined in a particular incident having occurred and when and where it happened. Central to this process is the creation of a *timeline* of incidents within the overall event. Contemporary maps, in situ fieldwork and research workshops with local historians, archivists and curators provided further sources for the verification of the evidence. These combined sources were then used to provide the basis for detailed narrative accounts which added general contextual information on the governance, economy, politics, popular culture and class demography of the city in the period and more specifically the movement for reform in each region. As both of the case studies in this paper were related to the exceptional riot in Bristol, specific study of the economic, political and social links between the locales and Bristol was also undertaken.

Two further areas of investigation in the case studies were the targets of the rioters and the composition of the crowd. Biographical information for the former was collected on the people or owners of properties that were attacked by the crowd. For the latter ‘lower orders’, typically a more difficult research problem, a prosopographical approach was taken with data collected on arrestees’ name, gender and age. This basic information was then augmented by using census and parish records, city directories, newspaper searches, criminal registers, and poll books to investigate the backgrounds of the participants. Finally, where possible, familial, residential, political and economic connections between the participants were documented.

Collating this richer data on arrestees allowed some characteristics of the crowd members to be ascertained beyond merely age and gender.[7] These included occupation, place of residence, marital status, family size, literacy, property ownership, regional migration, previous criminal history, post-reform voting rights and some evidence of social networks. Combining this information with more general research into housing, employment, sanitation and health, local politics and governance in each city provided the context required for a ‘thick description’ approach.

Situational evidence for beliefs and motives was ascertained from comments, shouts, chants or slogans employed by members of the crowd. This was complemented by focusing on the material culture of protest, gathering details of any flyers, posters, banners and flags displayed. In addition, motives could sometimes be inferred by what people did in the particular context, as in the Newport case study.

Analysis

In the first part of the analysis, we draw upon the overall survey to provide an overview of diffusion in the October 1831 reform riots. This enables us to make preliminary observations about whether particular events were independent or interdependent. In the second part, we provide a summary of the Bristol riot, which was significant for the riots in nearby Bath and Newport. Finally, we present a detailed case study for each of the latter.

Overall survey: The diffusion of riots in October 1831

As Figure 1 illustrates, there seem to be three temporal and spatial clusters of riots in October 1831. The first, situated in the east Midlands, relates to the riots in Derby and Nottingham which began on the evening of Saturday 8th and the morning of Sunday 9th of October respectively, and which each lasted for three days. These were each initiated by the arrival (by carriage) of news of the defeat of the Second Reform Bill. In each case, the riots were basically attempts by the crowd to contest the result and punish the anti-reformers and their authorities for the failure of the Bill (Ball et al., 2021). Therefore, these seem to be essentially independent events, rather than one influencing the other.

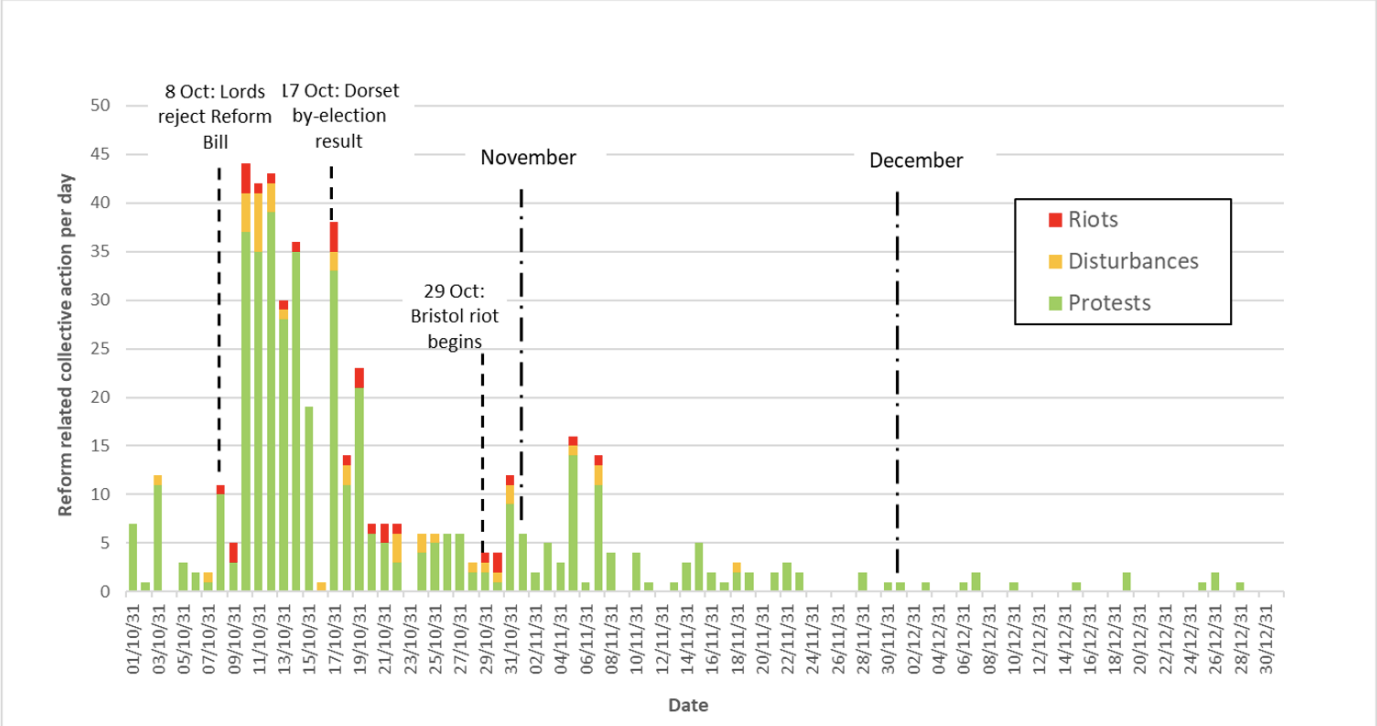

Figure 1. Reform-related collective action events per day in Britain and Ireland, 1 st October – 31st December 1831.

The second cluster appeared in the South-West of England, in Dorset and Somerset, over the period 17-22 October. This includes riots in Dorchester, Blandford, Poole, Sherborne, and Yeovil. These incidents were related to a high-profile by-election taking place in Dorset. In microcosm, this represented the battle between what was widely described as ‘old corruption’ – i.e., those Tory MPs, peers, gentry and clergy who supported the deeply flawed and exclusive electoral

system – and the Whig party reformers. In a very close contest, the anti-reform candidate Lord Ashley controversially won the seat in Dorchester on 17th October.

Dorchester was the first place in the region to suffer serious collective violence, which originated at the by-election hustings. The motive of the crowd here was again to punish anti-reformers and their agents who were perceived to have corrupted the voting. Information on the contested result in Dorchester, as well as eyewitness accounts of attacks by yeomanry on the crowd, arrived the same evening in Blandford (Poole et al., 2023a) and then Poole, which were the next places to riot (17-18 October). News of the contested election result and the riots would have been common knowledge in Sherborne the day after the election result (18 October). The Sherborne riots began the day after that, lasting for three days (19-21 October; Ball et al., 2023). The riot in nearby Yeovil started on the third day of rioting in Sherborne and lasted two days (21-22 October; Poole et al., 2023b). Therefore, Yeovil people would have certainly heard about disorder in Sherborne and the others by that stage.

We infer from this sequence that there was a significant degree of interdependence in this cluster. People were responding to the other locations rioting, not just to the victory of the anti-Reform candidate. However, in the data we have for these events there is little evidence of the process: we were unable to locate examples of motives that refer to the previous riot locations.

The third cluster is centred on the most serious riot of the period. Over 29th-31st October, Bristol experienced severe and intense collective violence along with a bloody military intervention. Riots and disturbances also occurred in nearby Bath (30-31st October) and Newport (31st October). Here, we find evidence of psychological influence from Bristol to the other two locations, in the form of actions, utterances, and observations by those present. This is the basis of the case study analyses below.

The Bristol riot[8]

The incident that led to the start of rioting in Bristol on Saturday 29th October was the provocative entry into the city of an outspoken anti-Reform judge and MP. A mass protest against the visit escalated into a riot, after violence by special constables[9] against the crowd outside the Mansion House (the mayor's official residence), which caused numerous injuries. After the crowd retaliated and began to swell in numbers, many of the special constables abandoned their posts, apparently emboldening the rioters. Later that evening, a military unit opened fire on rioters killing one man and injuring several others.

At dawn in Bristol on Sunday 30th October, the Mayor of Bristol, several aldermen, and a few exhausted special constables were barricaded in the upper floor of the Mansion House after the rioting the day before. Although the crowd outside was small, their numbers were growing once again, and they started throwing stones at the building. Sometime after 9.00am, the mayor began seeking support from yeomanry and military units in nearby towns to quell the rioters, who had also been attacking Bristol's gaols. It was the response to this call for yeomanry and military units, along with what it signified to people living in Bath and Newport, that shaped actions in these two nearby towns.

The Bath riot[10]

Only 12 miles apart by road, Bath and Bristol are near neighbours and had several connections in terms of work, industry, and travel. People clearly came and went between the two cities, and intercity labouring networks are also revealed in the regularity with which magistrates in Bristol enforced removal orders on paupers claiming relief in Bath and vice versa. Industries within easy reach of workers from both cities included numerous coal-mines, brass smelting, textile factories, and paper mills. As a leading centre for health and leisure activities for the wealthy, Bath created a considerable demand for domestic servants, many of whom came from Bristol families. As one Bath-based newspaper correspondent put it when news of the Bristol riots first emerged, 'we hope the report is not true that many artisans and labourers of this city have left their work to go and join the rioters of Bristol'. Workers from one factory, he thought, may indeed have done so, 'but we believe they are nearly all natives of Bristol'.[11] Studies of Bristol poll books demonstrate that more than 100 out-voters were resident in Bath, the majority of whom were artisans and small traders. Working class interaction is also suggested by the participation of at least one organised Bristol trade in Bath's huge reform demonstration in October 1831.

The request from the Bristol mayor for military help arrived with the Mayor of Bath early in the afternoon, 30th October. At 3.20pm, the commander of the Bath troop of the North Somerset Yeomanry Regiment, Captain Charles Wilkins, received instructions to 'assemble his men and march them to the neighbourhood of Bristol for the preservation of the peace'.[12] Wilkins made a quick decision to muster his troops in the 'usual rendezvous' of Queen Square in central Bath and began sending out orders to round up his men.[13]

About two hours after Wilkins received his call for assistance, William Hall, mayor's officer, warned Robert Tothill (another mayor's officer) to expect trouble because he believed local people would be opposed to the yeomanry assembling in Bath.[14] The glow and rising smoke from the fires in Bristol had been visible from some parts of Bath since late afternoon, so it will have been clear to many that something was happening. The Mayor later said he knew that 'a considerable mob' from Bath had gathered 'in the streets leading to Bristol to collect information respecting that city', and the *London Courier's* correspondent at Bath reported crowds collecting at the bottom of Union Street 'to await the arrival of the mail from Bristol, to learn the news thence'. By this means they learned that the Yeomanry were being mustered, making them 'exasperated', and 'determined those gentlemen should not quit Bath'.[15] As the mayor's officer would later tell the assize hearing, 'It was known at Bath that the Mansion House in Bristol was on fire, and the gaol, and that the prisoners had been liberated'.[16] The mood on the streets was confirmed by one of the city's two chief constables: As soon as it was known that 'Bristol was in the hands of the rioters', he deposed, Bath was 'in a state of great excitement'.[17]

Tothill saw the North Somerset Yeomanry's quartermaster, Bence, ride by in full regimental uniform, pursued by a crowd and take refuge in the Greyhound coaching inn (almost opposite the Guildhall).[18] Tothill went in to investigate and was joined there by Hall and at least one other mayor's officer, summoned by the landlord because the crowd had stopped outside and were shouting for Bence to leave and not go to Bristol.[19]

Captain Wilkins, distinctive in his Regimentals, was heading towards the White Hart coaching inn, the headquarters of the

North Somerset Yeomanry when in Bath, when he was impeded by a crowd of ‘low characters’ who repeated the demand that the yeomanry should not go to Bristol.[20] They formed a line and forced him back down Stall Street.[21] He was:

> *followed by a mob of several hundred persons, hooting, shouting, and throwing oyster shells and mud at him. The Captain repeatedly attempted to turn his horse towards the mob, but without effect, and he soon cantered down the street.*[22]

Wilkins took another route and entered the White Hart by a rear entrance. Protected by the mayor’s officers he then addressed the crowd from the front door, saying he was a reformer, but had to do his duty. Members of the crowd responded by ‘crying out, “Out with him, out with the bugger; he shall not go to Bristol”, and shoving with all force to gain an entrance to the inn’. After having removed his distinctive uniform, Wilkins slipped away from the Inn.[23] Between 6.30pm and 7.00pm, Hall and others repeatedly told the crowd that Wilkins had left the White Hart by a rear door, ‘but to no purpose’. For some time, the crowd pushed at the front door while Hall, the Inn’s servants, and a handful of others pushed back. Eventually, the front doors were closed, bolted and barricaded, and the crowd responded by attacking the doors, windows, and shutters and, once access was obtained, furniture, with stones, ‘bludgeons, faggot sticks and pieces of broken furniture’.[24]

As the destruction at the White Hart continued, ‘considerable parties’ of rioters broke off to throw stones at the Guildhall windows only 150m away. The *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette* later speculated that this was to keep the ‘police officers’ occupied in defending the Guildhall so they could not intervene at the White Hart. Whether this was by design or chance it had that effect, so for a considerable period the rioters at the inn were ‘unmolested by any constables or other force’.[25]

The Inn’s office was broken into. Inn servant, Daniel Rees, later claimed that he told them, ‘you can’t want anything in here, don’t destroy the office’, but they replied, ‘we will have the office down and the house too… this is our time; go it, go it my lads. We will serve them as they have at Bristol’.

By the time the attack on the Inn was over, some 487 panes of glass had allegedly been broken and there was structural damage to walls, roofs, ceilings and floors.[26] In the estimation of one of the chief constables, there were 300-400 people present by this time. Hall claimed the crowd was much larger -- up to 2,000 people around the White Hart alone.[27]

After the attack on the White Hart, Hall encountered a crowd in Broad Street, ‘hallooing, shouting and screeching’, and confronted them with some constables. There was hand-to-hand fighting, and as Hall later told the assize court, the crowd were ‘drawn up in a regular line like a regiment of soldiers’. They were armed with bludgeons, he said, ‘with which they dared and menaced the constables’. To impede the constables further, aid stone throwing, and perhaps to mask the identity of individuals in the crowd, small boys were hoisted up to the gas lamps in several of these streets to knock them out or to pull down the gas pipes.[28]

Rioting continued in streets around the Guildhall until about 2.00am.[29] Despite the intervention of several hundred special constables, the crowd managed to prevent an entire military unit from mustering and delayed their arrival in Bristol until the following day. By the time the Bath troop did arrive in Bristol, the riots there were more or less over.

The Newport disturbance[30]

The geographic proximity of Bristol and Newport – ~26 miles – led to trading links which were developed over several centuries. These encouraged not only the reciprocal movement of commodities across the Bristol Channel, but also the labour required to transport them. By 1825, the number of people with Welsh surnames in Bristol was around 10 per cent of the population, and despite other new arrivals the Welsh retained their status as the largest ethnic minority in the city.

Just over three months before the Reform riots, the 'Merthyr rising' took place. Ironworkers repossessed goods seized by the Court of Requests, and then persuaded miners to join them. It took a week for the troops to regain control of the town, actions which left over 20 protesters dead. These dramatic events nearby, and the hostility to troops, likely provided a framing for Newport people's perception of the authorities' actions in Bristol in October.

On 30th October, as the Bristol rioters turned their attention to the Bishop's Palace after setting fire to the gaols, the mayor rapidly penned a letter to the commanding officer of troops at Cardiff, urging him to send his troops to Bristol.

The seriousness of the situation in Bristol became apparent to the majority of the population of Newport as darkness fell on the Sunday evening. A reporter for the *Merlin* described the scene:

> *The utmost anxiety and consternation was depicted on the countenances of the inhabitants of this town on Monday, as they stood in groups about the streets, regarding the fate of the ancient city of Bristol, with which many of them are in some way or other connected. The flames were distinctly seen on Sunday night from the bridge and the churchyard for several hours. At times the horizon was so bright, that the reflection upon the Channel was apparently to the extent of half the width of it. The fire was also seen upon the hills beyond Risca.*[31]

Early on the morning of Monday 31 October at Cardiff Castle, Lieutenant Colonel Love acquiesced to the Bristol mayor's request by mustering 167 men for the relief of Bristol from the three reserve companies of the 11th Regiment of Foot.[32] Newport, unlike Cardiff, had a regular steam packet service to Bristol which offered the means, by requisition, to transport his men in one group.[33] Love therefore decided to force march his unit the 12 miles to Newport.

The troops entered Newport around midday of a working Monday. The soldiers would have been audible and visible to those people on the street and in adjacent houses, if not further afield. Entering from the south, the troops passed through some of the most deprived parts of Newport close to the wharves and warehouses of the dock facilities.

The steam packet wharf was on the opposite bank of the River Usk, so Love made directly for Newport Bridge. In his report to the Home Office a few days later, Love stated:

> *I regret to inform your Lordship that a very bad feeling was shown by the lower orders at Newport on Monday last when I embarked with the Reserve of the 11th Regiment for Bristol; and it was only by taking Military possession of the Steam boat, that I prevented the mob from cutting her adrift.*[34]

This relatively simple (under) statement carries some important information; that a crowd (a 'mob') had gathered, and it was composed of the 'lower orders' who exhibited 'a very bad feeling'.

It is likely that a crowd gathered in this way only because of foreknowledge of the arrival of the troops or, more spontaneously, as they actually marched into Newport. Previous experience of troop movements, the relatively large numbers involved in this case, along with widespread visual and verbal knowledge of the rioting and burning in Bristol the previous night, made the appearance of the 11th Foot logical. By inference, it would have become obvious very rapidly to most people in Newport *where* the troops were going and with reference to recent events in Merthyr,*what* their role was going to be. It would not have taken long for a crowd of the 'lower orders' to deduce that the steam packet moored in full view on the opposite bank of the river was the troop's means of travel.

A contemporary source which adds detail to this event and perhaps had greater access to military sources, comes from an article in the *United Service Journal* of 1831. The Journal contains numerous pieces clearly written by serving officers, though often anonymously. In an article entitled 'The Riots at Bristol', the author claimed:

> *Marching first to Newport, he [Lt. Col. Love] there seized a steamer, which the mob of that place, in complete sympathy with their brethren at Bristol, violently attempted to prevent his occupying. Having prepared a regular attack upon the troops, they were only deterred from carrying it into execution by a few significant words and preparatives, on the part of the Commanding Officer, boding a warm reception from the soldiers. Having vainly attempted to cut the boat adrift, their fury found vent in execrations, and wishes for the sinking of the vessel ere her crew should trouble their confederates at Bristol.*[35]

This article supposes more than just the 'taking possession' of the steam packet by the 11th Foot as recounted by Love (above). Instead, we have a confrontation between a crowd conscious of why it is there ('complete sympathy with their brethren in Bristol') and a military unit, with the former 'having prepared a regular attack upon the troops'. It also suggests that Love threatened the crowd ('a few significant words') and that he ordered the soldiers to get ready for violent action ('preparatives, boding a warm reception').[36] His actions were apparently successful.

According to most sources, the men of the 11th Foot eventually marched into central Bristol at 6.00pm.[37] Despite the triumphal nature of this entrance, by the time they arrived in the city, the riot had been violently crushed by Dragoon Guards and was effectively over.

Consequently, less than four days after their arrival in Bristol and due to fears of further unrest in Merthyr and its environs, on Friday 4 November Lt. Col. Love and the troop were on the move again, returning to Cardiff via Newport.[38] The *Cambrian* newspaper noted somewhat quizzically:

> *We are concerned to hear that the 11th Regiment of Foot were hooted and hissed at Newport … when returning from Bristol... While this highly disgraceful manifestation emanated, no doubt, from the most low and ignorant of*

> *the inhabitants, it behoves every well-wisher of this country to discountenance such proceedings.*[39]

This behaviour was in keeping with the confrontation on Monday 31 October, and by this point news concerning the 'massacre' of 'rioters' in Bristol by British Army units would have been widespread.

Discussion

Our survey of riots in the October 1831 wave suggested that there were different types of 'spread' operating. In the first cluster, the collective action events appeared to be independent – they had a common cause, which was the grievance over the

defeat of the second reform bill; but they did not appear to influence each other. In the second cluster, in Dorset and Somerset, the pattern of events is consistent with interdependence – collective action events influenced the occurrence of other collective action events. However, we were unable to find evidence of the psychological process in these cases. We focused the rest of the analysis on the case studies of Bath and Newport, which closely followed the major riot in Bristol, making up the third cluster in the overall wave.

What happened in Bath and Newport does not fit well with the idea of mindless 'contagion' (e.g., Le Bon, 1895). The evidence on what the crowds targeted, and on what they left untouched (private homes and shops, for example), in fact reinforces a point made over forty years ago in social psychology: even the most violent crowd behaviour is limited by the definition of social identity shared by crowd participants (Reicher, 1984).

Nor does the evidence fit its opposite, the notion that the main social influence mechanism was emulation via learning and inspiration based on costs-benefits analysis as diffusion theorists suggest (e.g., Aidt et al., 2022; Myers, 1997). In the first place, the crowd in Bath certainly had the power to do whatever it wanted at points during the riot, yet there is no evidence of looting or other personal gain.

Second, the nature of the collective actions in both Bath and Newport seemed to reflect a motive that was in fact the opposite of personal benefit. The actions of the crowd in Bath were intended to delay the troops from getting to Bristol. This is evident in a number of the recorded cries to that effect. In Newport, essentially there was a confrontation and struggle which had a similar motive. In this case, we have no recordings of what people in the crowd said, but several statements from witnesses testify to the crowd's intentions (to sabotage the journey of the troops to Bristol). Rather than standing to benefit personally from these actions, participants in fact put themselves at risk of bullet and bayonet wounds, imprisonment, transportation, and even the gallows. These were acts of solidarity. As Hirsch (1990) illustrated so cogently in a study of a student occupation, explanatory models of collective action in terms of narrow personal self-interest cannot explain self-sacrifice for the cause (except perhaps in a vacuous or circular way).

Finally, our analysis suggests that the actions of the crowd were not 'the same' in Bristol and the other locations. In Bristol, the crowd attacked the mayor's residence, gaols, Toll booths, and the Bishop's palace. In Bath, the crowd

attacked just the headquarters of the Yeomanry (the White Hart inn) and the muster point for special constables (the Guildhall). In Newport the crowd attempted to interdict a military unit and sabotage the ship that was to take troops to Bristol. While all locations saw confrontational actions, the specificity of targets suggests that the Bath and Newport rioters did not simply attempt to emulate their neighbour's behaviour.

While it's possible that these solidarity actions were driven by allyship between different groups, the evidence that there were in fact close bonds between people in the different cities is more consistent with the notion that there was a common identity between them, and that this was the basis of the action in support of the Bristol rioters, in line with the social identity model (Drury et al., 2020). The evidence of bonds is in two forms. First, there were the longstanding and multiple social connections between each town and Bristol, that likely were the basis of psychological connections. Second, there is the evidence from within the events that people in Bath and Newport felt emotionally connected to the fate of people in Bristol. As well as proactive attempts to stop the troops from travelling, there is evidence in both locations of retributive motives, again apparently reflecting strong feeling about what the troops had done in Bristol.

However, the events in Bath and Newport were different in an important way from previously-documented cases of riot spread based on common identity. In south London in 2011, the motives of rioters who shared identity with those in north London were punishment of and retaliation against the police (Drury et al., 2020). In both Bath and Newport, however, the initial motive was rather to *prevent* the state forces from acting. We therefore argue that in these case studies we have documented for the first time the existence of *pre-emptive* solidarity riots.

Strengths and limitations

Two case studies alone cannot demonstrate that the psychological mechanism of spread elsewhere in the 1831 riot wave, or indeed in other waves, was common identity-based solidarity. In addition, the fact that we found evidence of common identity-based solidarity can't demonstrate that other motives were not operating alongside them in some of the participants in Bath and Newport. Indeed, these were not our aims. Our aim was simply to show that it is problematic to assume inspiration/learning-emulation and cost-benefit is the only or main mechanism of spread.

A strength of the case studies presented here is the rich detail and volume of evidence, enabling a micro-analysis of behaviours and events over time. The use of multiple sources, both to show the contours of behaviour and to evidence motives also gives us confidence in the analytic claims made here.

An argument in recent social psychological analyses of riot spread is that local group processes are crucial (Drury et al., 2020, 2022). A key reason why people decide to come on to the streets when collective actions happen elsewhere is often the fact that it is perceived as normative for their peers or local network. By its nature, this kind of evidence of meta-perceptions is not likely to be available to an archive study like the present one.

A question arises over possible differences and similarities of riots in the early nineteenth century with modern urban riots. On the one hand, the belief that police (or troops) defeat or weakness in one location could limit their ability to repress a crowd in another location is also a potential feature of modern riots in proximal locations (e.g., Brixton and Clapham in

2011; Drury et al., 2020). On the other hand, the 1831 events, unlike those of 2011, were linked by a national campaign (around reform), which may have made pre-emptive solidarity more likely than in the case of modern urban riots. Arguably, however, this difference is not one of historical features but of particular struggles. One can imagine, for example, striking miners in 1984 believing that a large mobilisation in one town could tie up police thereby limiting their effectiveness in another town.

Broader implications

The present study contributes to different areas in social psychology and beyond in a number of ways. First, it adds to existing social identity research on the nature and diffusion of crowd conflict (Drury & Reicher, 2020; Reicher, 1984; Stott et al., 2018). Second, it contributes to the literature on collective action. Social influence is a huge factor in explaining collective action participation, but it is ignored in dominant social psychological explanations of collective action, none of which mention it. A similar point can be made about sociological models of social movements. While both grievance and 'resources' help explain why some towns rioted in the 1831 wave and others did not, interdependence – influence between events – was crucial in explaining the timing as well as some of the form of the action. Finally, the present study demonstrates the value of historical research for social psychology. It has shown how the social identity approach in social psychology might be applied to examples from history, as well as contributing to a richer, more psychologically informed approach to studying the crowd in historical research.

Statements and Declarations

Author contributions (CRediT)

John Drury: conceptualization, writing. Roger Ball: conceptualization, investigation, writing. Steve Poole: conceptualization, investigation, writing.

Conflict of interest statement

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

All data used in this paper are publicly available including at The National Archive and Bath Record Office.

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Statement of contribution

‘What is already known on this subject?’

- Previous research has shown that collective action events can spread from location to location.
- The dominant explanation for this diffusion process is that it is emulation based on learning and reward, but there is insufficient evidence for this.

‘What does this study add?’

- We show that common identity helps explain spread between locations.
- For the first time, we evidence a motive of pre-emptive solidarity not (just) retribution.

Footnotes

[1] However, there are also many examples of irrationalist psychology mixed in with the rationalist approaches they adopt (e.g., Midlarsky’s (1978) reference to ‘disinhibition’).

[2] Two other surveys of the period were in existence (Horn & Tilly, 2009; Tiratelli, 2020), but they were either limited in geographical scope or in sources.

[3] The Home Office data was from The National Archive (TNA): Home Office: Counties Correspondence 1820-1850 Ref. HO 52/12-16 (1831) and the dataset on locations of Political Unions is given in LoPatin (1999, p. 182 n.57 and pp. 174-177).

[4] Further details of the categories of information gathered can be found in Ball et al. (2021).

[5] See for example: Stott et al. (2018) and Ball et al. (2019).

[6] The ‘late modern period’ covers the years 1800-1945.

[7] This was only possible for the Bath riot as in the Newport incident there were apparently no arrests.

[8] This summary is based on more comprehensive case studies of the Bristol riot (Poole, 2023a, 2023b).

[9] ‘Special constables’ were volunteers who signed up for a limited period to assist regular constables and magistrates typically for public order situations.

[10] This analysis is based on a more comprehensive case study (Poole et al., 2024).

[11] *London Courier* 1 November 1831.

[12] The National Archive (TNA) HO 52/15, f.597 Copy of letter from JPs Charles Cook and William Clarke to Captain Charles Wilkins 30 October 1831.

[13] TNA, HO 52/15, ff.593-594 & 596, Marquess of Bath to Melbourne, enclosing Captain Wilkins's explanation of events, 4 and 14 Nov 1831.

[14] BRO, Philip George Papers, bundle 206, information of William Hall, 16 November 1831.

[15] TNA HO 52/15, f.624, Kitson to Melbourne, 31 October 1831;*London Courier* 1 November 1831. According to the Courier's Bath correspondent, the Bristol fires could be seen from both the Old Bridge and Norfolk Crescent, and 'the horizon illuminated with almost equal grandeur as the setting sun'.

[16] Sherborne Mercury 9 April 1832.

[17] Bath Record Office (BRO), Philip George Papers, bundle 206, information of Chief Constable, 16 November 1831.

[18] The Guildhall was Bath's administrative centre, the seat of the Corporation and magistrates, and the site of its law courts.

[19] BRO, Philip George Papers, bundle 206, information of Robert Tothill, 16 November 1831.

[20] *Bath Herald* 5 November 1831.

[21] BRO, Philip George Papers, bundle 206, information of William Hall (second testimony, not dated).

[22] Bath and Cheltenham Gazette 3 April 1832.

[23] *Bath Chronicle*, 3 November 1831; *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette* 1 November 1831; *Bath Herald* 5 November 1831.

[24] Information of William Hall (second testimony, not dated); prosecution brief vs John Holbein and John Durnell;*Bath and Cheltenham Gazette* 3 April 1832.

[25] Bath and Cheltenham Gazette 1 November 1831; Bath Herald 5 November 1831.

[26] *Bath Chronicle* 5 April 1831; information of William Sims, 31 October 1831.

[27] BRO, Philip George Papers, bundle 206, First information of William Hall, 31 October 1831.

[28] Information of William Hall (first testimony, 31 October 1831 and second testimony, not dated); prosecution brief vs Benjamin Stride, John Macey and Joseph Maggs; *Bath Chronicle* 5 April 1832.

[29] Sherborne Mercury 9 April 1831.

[30] This analysis is based on a more comprehensive case study (Ball, in press).

[31] *Monmouthshire Merlin* 5 November 1831. This was confirmed by *Bath Chronicle* 10 November 1831.

[32] The National Archive (TNA) HO 40/28/01 Home Office: Disturbances Correspondence - Activities in distressed areas Civil and military reports - Bristol, riots – Col. Love (OC Cardiff) to Lord Melbourne ff.24-25; TNA WO12/2860 Commissary General of Musters Office and successors: General Muster Books and Pay Lists – Infantry - 11th Foot muster rolls 1831.

[33] Monmouthshire Merlin 29 October 1831.

[34] TNA HO 52/16 Counties Correspondence: Warwick - York, Wales and miscellaneous – Lt. Col. Love to Lord Melbourne ff.138-140.

[35] "The Riots at Bristol" *The United Service Journal* Vol. III (London: Samuel Bentley, 1831) p. 439.

[36] Preparing a 'a warm reception' is a military term for getting ready to use violence against an advancing opponent. In this case it could refer to a unit loading rifles with ball (shot) or fixing bayonets.

[37] Amey, City Under Fire p.106; Eagles, J, The Bristol riots, their causes, progress, and consequences (1832); The Bristol Job Nott, or Labouring Man's Friend, issue VI 19 January 1832 p. 22.

[38] TNA HO 41/10 Home Office: Disturbances Entry Books - 1831 April-Dec 31 Oct 1831 Lamb to J. B. Bruce ff. 160-161; TNA WO12/2860 Commissary General of Musters Office and successors: General Muster Books and Pay Lists – Infantry - 11th Foot muster rolls 1831; *Monmouthshire Merlin* 12 November 1831.

[39] *The Cambrian* states this event occurred on 'Monday last' (7 November) but this appears to be in error, all the other evidence suggests Friday 4 November. *The Cambrian* 12 November 1831.

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