



Open Research Online

Citation

Cooper, Vickie and Whyte, David (2022). Grenfell, Austerity and Institutional Violence. *Sociological Research Online*, 27(1) pp. 207–216.

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/56287/>

License

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

Grenfell, Austerity and Institutional Violence

Vickie Cooper and David Whyte

Abstract:

The complex chains of decisions that produce disasters like the Grenfell Tower fire are not readily described as 'violence.' 'Violence' is something that remains largely understood in popular consciousness, and in sociology, as an interpersonal phenomenon, and as the result of a deliberate attempt to cause harm. This is largely because our understanding of violence is always somehow connected to legal concepts and principles. In this article we argue that the Grenfell fire was produced by a form of collective decision-making that we describe as institutional violence; it reflects the routine order and detached administration of a form of violence that is intimately connected to a more insidious targeting of subject groups and populations in ways that produce and increase the likelihood of other, ongoing, violent circumstances occurring.

Keywords: Grenfell; Regulation; Social Housing; Austerity; Violence

Introduction

Have we witnessed a more devastating and extreme public act of violence than the Grenfell Tower fire in living memory in this country? In the past 30 years, the scale of the death toll at the Grenfell Tower fire is perhaps only comparable to the Piper Alpha disaster which killed 167 people on the 6th July 1988.

The complex chains of decisions that produce disasters like these are not readily described as 'violence.' 'Violence' is something that remains largely understood in popular consciousness, and in sociology, as an *interpersonal* phenomenon, and as the result of a *deliberate* attempt to cause harm (Tilly, 2003, Tombs, 2006). This is largely because our understanding of violence is always somehow connected to legal concepts and principles. Legal constructions of violence rest on a number of assumptions that reinforce the *interpersonal* and *deliberate* characteristics of acts of violence. Two of those interconnected characteristics frame the discussion in this paper. First, violence is generally understood in law as something that is committed between autonomously acting individuals. Yet the violence of the Grenfell fire can only be understood, as we will argue below, as the result of a complex configuration of collectively produced decisions made by individuals working in organisations. Collectively produced decisions that result in violent outcomes, such as the Grenfell fire, typically involve a more remote proximity, in time and space, between the offender and the victim than we find in cases of interpersonal violence (Whyte, 2017; Cooper, 2015). Second, conventional understandings of violence generally view a violent event as a series of atomised occurrences that exist in isolation from their social context; in isolation from the on-going relationship between the victim and the offender (ibid.). Yet the genesis of the Grenfell fire can only be explained, partly at least, as result of a set of ongoing power relationships, in this case, between the tenant and the public or private authority that determines the way their living conditions and the maintenance of the building are managed. It is this power relationship rather than any isolated event or individual decision that produced the extreme violence at Grenfell Tower.

We are not used to thinking of a local authority or housing authority as violent, however, in this article we argue that the on-going power relations between those making the decisions and the tenants who were subject to the outcomes of collective decision-making can be characterised as *institutional* violence. We use the term institutional violence to describe the routine and detached administration of policies, implemented by public and private authorities, that produce acute physical and psychological violence. Institutional violence involves the targeting of subject groups and populations in ways that produce and increase the likelihood of other, ongoing, violent circumstances occurring. The following section explores some of the institutional conditions that led to the disaster, before the paper sets out precisely how and why we regard the Grenfell fire as a case of institutional violence.

The Conditions of Violence

The Local Authority, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), the organisation responsible for the management of the building, Kensington and Chelsea Tenants Management Organisation (KCTMO), and the long list of companies in the supply chain have serious questions to answer about their role in producing the risks that caused the fire. In particular, the residents' organisation, Grenfell Action Group, warned that the renovations and other work to the building might breach the law, be combustible, or otherwise potentially deadly.¹

Most commentaries have focussed on the unlawful or inappropriate use of materials in the cladding used for the building, and indeed this has been a major focus of investigations by both the government and the Metropolitan Police. The issue of who is responsible for the use of unsafe materials is contested and we don't intend to enter into this discussion. However, a different but related issue that is *uncontested* is that the renovation work on Grenfell Tower that took place in 2016, and the cladding installed in this work, was the subject of cost-driven downgrading.

In 2012, *Construction News* reported that the contract for the refurbishment of the Grenfell Tower was awarded to Leadbitter for a total £11.27m (Wilmore, 2017). However, KCTMO, then put the contract out to tender again to find a cheaper contractor and, in 2014, awarded Rydon the contract for the refurbishment, at a substantially reduced price of £8.7m (*ibid.*).

Not long after, in March 2015, the refurbishment management faced accusations that it was "using cheap materials."² Documents attesting to the driving down of costs include an "urgent nudge email" that KCTMO's project manager sent to Artelia, the project cost management contractor, about cladding prices.³ This e-mail was reported to have included the statement: "We need good costs for Councillor Rock Feilding-Mellen and the planner tomorrow at 8.45am!"⁴ Artelia replied with three options including a downgrading of the cladding to make cost savings.⁵ Councillor Feilding-Mellen who at the time was Chair of RBKC's housing committee, approved the changes to the contract. These cost-cutting decisions raise questions about KCTMO who commissioned the refurbishment project and RBKC who retain overall responsibility for ensuring the safe management and maintenance of Grenfell Tower.

The hazardous conditions generated at Grenfell were allowed to further deteriorate over time, despite clear warnings from the tenants. In a chilling and now famous blog post, the Grenfell

¹ See the blog postings in the Grenfell Action Group archive, especially the post dated 20th November. Available online at: <https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2016/11/20/kctmo-playing-with-fire/>

² Reported in *Independent*, 30th June 2017.

³ Reported in *The Guardian*, 30th June 2017.

⁴ as footnote 1 above.

⁵ as footnote 1 above.

Action Group warned very clearly about the likelihood of such a fire occurring. One post noted:

We have blogged many times on the subject of fire safety at Grenfell Tower and we believe that these investigations will become part of damning evidence of the poor safety record of the KCTMO should a fire affect any other of their properties and cause the loss of life that we are predicting.⁶

There is an important political background to the local politics that is described here. At every level of government, the regulation of safety has been on the back-foot in the UK for some 30 years. Successive governments have virtually mandated a withdrawal from law enforcement in health and safety and local authority regulation. In most recent years, austerity cuts have taken us to the point that the average workplace can now expect an inspector to call once every 50 years (James et. al., 2018). Fire protection has been similarly compromised by the cuts; savings came predominantly from reducing staff costs and reducing audits, inspections, fire risk checks. Fire safety checks in tower blocks fell 25% in the most recent 5 years.⁷ This sustained ideological and material attack on safety conditions has pervaded all levels of government as successive governments have proudly boasted of a ‘bonfire of red tape’ (Tombs and Whyte, 2010; Tombs, 2016). We can only understand what happened in the political economy of the refurbishment and on-going management of Grenfell Tower as a collective decision-making process that is framed by this so-called bonfire of red tape.

RBKC policies delivered the central government strategy of regulatory degradation with some verve. The borough is widely known as one of the richest in the country, with the highest proportion of residents earning over £60,000.⁸ As such it is one of the few local authorities in the country that has ample resources to ensure that the housing it owns is adequately maintained, and to ensure adequate levels of regulatory scrutiny in housing and building standards. Yet instead of investing in those areas of social protection, RBKC developed a council tax rebate scheme that benefits the borough’s richest residents. In this scheme, RBKC has paid out annual “efficiency dividends” in the borough since 2009. This rebate scheme was based upon discounts given to the richest residents (no one with discounted bills or claiming council tax support was eligible for this “dividend”). In order to pay for the dividend and to cut its council tax rate, RBKC at the same time slashed expenditure in key areas of social protection. Spending on planning in the local authority fell by 81%, housing by 76% and regulatory services by 22% as part of an overall spending reduction of 36% (Benjamin, 2018). Thus, in the period leading up to the Grenfell fire, there is evidence to suggest that RBKC was undermining housing and safety regulation in order to reward the richest residents.

At the time of writing this article, we are aware that explanations for the fire are bound to change, and we do not claim that the brief summary above reflects precisely the conditions that lead to the disaster. However, our commentary does indicate that some key decisions instrumental in producing the disaster must be understood as *avoidable*. The political conditions created by the bonfire of red tape at the level of central government and the delivery of those policies at a local level encouraged profits and cost-savings to be prioritised over basic safety standards. Those institutional priorities were very deliberately constructed.

Institutional Violence

⁶ The full blog is at: <https://grenfellaactiongroup.wordpress.com/2016/11/20/kctmo-playing-with-fire/>

⁷ from Freedom of Information requests supplied to the Sunday People and published, 17th June, 2017.

⁸ Office of National Statistics, *datasheet KS101EW Usual resident population, local authorities in England and Wales*. Available online, here:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/2011censuskeystatisticsforlocalauthoritiesinenglandandwales>

Sociologists seeking to overcome the epistemological limitations of interpersonal violence have tended to use the broader construction of 'structural violence' (Farmer, 2004; Gupta, 2012). The meaning of the term structural violence as coined by Johan Galtung (1969) is normally taken to mean the harms that are created through *preventing people meeting their basic needs*. Structural violence results from inequalities that are routed in the institutionalised practices. Thus, racism, sexism and classism are forms of structural violence. Since coming into our lexicon, the concept of structural violence has variously been deployed to make sense of the violent conditions inextricably linked to poverty and forms of unequal power relations. Because the origins of violence are deeply rooted in social practices and enduring inequalities, structural violence is systemic, 'silent', 'routine' and 'as natural as the air around us' (p.173). The concept of structural violence is useful for shifting our focus away from the 'interpersonal', to 'impersonal' nature of violence; a form of violence that is historically produced, built into structures of power and imposed on its victims at a distance. However, it is precisely this shift towards the 'impersonal' that limits the concept. Galtung notes he is not seeking to describe "the type of violence where there is an actor that commits the violence as personal or direct", but rather, the type of violence, "where there is no such actor" (p. 170). The concept of structural violence is therefore designed to capture a form of violence that is a) indirect; and b) involves no obvious actor.

Those two points represent the limitations of the concept as it might be applied in the context of the Grenfell Tower fire. First, we do not see how in the context of the fire, the dichotomy of 'direct' and 'indirect' violence is applicable. As we shall argue here, the violent effects (the immediate deaths and the physical and psychological harm) have been experienced directly by the victims. Second, we do not agree that there are no obvious actors that can be identified as responsible for both direct and indirect forms of violence. As Confortini (2006) has argued a major problem with Galtung's approach is that it views 'structures' as abstract, free-floating entities, and fails to highlight structures as "material processes." (see also Graeber, 2012). Yet the acute forms of violence at Grenfell were legitimated and authorized in concrete ways. We can explain the conditions that led to the fire as having arisen from a string of decisions by people in positions of power who could foresee the high chance of a violent outcome.

To talk of the violence that produced Grenfell Tower fire, then, is to talk of something much more concrete than 'structural' violence. On the one hand, it is clear that Grenfell residents' needs were not being met; there is evidence that their building was not being managed in a way that could maintain a decent standard of safe housing provision at Grenfell and across the UK (Carr et. al., 2018). However, on the other hand, the outcome of this kind of routine violence is one that goes beyond a narrow understanding of needs not being met. At a minimum, 72 people died in the most horrific circumstances imaginable. Moreover, the lasting psychological damage can be measured in large numbers of suicides, PTSD and life-long mental health problems for other victims, the families and friends of those who died and those who witnessed the fire (Booth, 2017). The extreme physical and psychological harm done to people did not result from a failure to provide needs, but stemmed from institutional policies and practices that prioritised immediate economic benefits in ways that knowingly produced an immanent threat to safety.

We therefore argue that in order to understand the violence we witnessed at Grenfell, it is important to take account of: i) the political and cultural context of a particular institutional environment and how it informs particular decisions that produce violent outcomes, whether intended or unintended; and ii) how those individuals and the institutions they represent are responsible for designing and implementing decisions that knowingly produce violence. As we have argued, the public and private institutions that are tasked with implementing and administering key political objectives, particularly in the period known as 'austerity' have come to rely on acute forms of violence as their modus operandi.

In our book *The Violence of Austerity* (Cooper and Whyte, 2017), we adopt a concept of institutional violence to identify precisely how particular public and private organisations have delivered acute physical and psychological harm, and have caused untold injury and death by administering austerity policies. In front of the very obvious rogues gallery of politicians who designed the austerity agenda – and refused to change course when its human consequences were in clear view – stand the armies of civil servants, government departments and Local Authorities. And in front of them stand the armies of private officials in companies like G4S and ATOS and public officials in benefits offices and housing authorities.

Institutional violence generally unfolds over time, at a deteriorative pace. In this sense, the violence of austerity can be best understood as slow violence that pervades people's lives over long periods of time (Nixon, 2013). It is the slow, deteriorative process of institutional violence imposed by austerity that gives it its force. The threat of destitution, repossession, deportation, going without a meal or having electricity or gas cut off, have now become a very real possibility for a fast-growing section of the population. Of course, we could not describe the Grenfell Tower fire itself as an example of "slow violence", but the fire is the outcome of a longer-term process of institutional violence. Grenfell tenants formed a diverse community, comprising immigrants, migrant workers, welfare recipients and precarious workers. Their socio-economic status mirrored the very population constantly vilified under neoliberal 'anti-welfare ideology' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015); a political ideology that has taken a venomous turn under austerity politics (Burnett, 2017).

Although the state once acted as an important buffer against the private market and provided a vital source of protection, austerity governments have plunged working class communities into a perpetual state of anxiety and distress. In 2010, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, attributed the growing structural budget deficit problem directly to 'out of control welfare costs'.⁹ In crafting an anti-welfare ideology, austerity governments have generated a major upheaval in our welfare institutions and administration, at a significant human cost. For the first time in the history of our welfare state we are seeing a distinct pattern of death and physical injury resulting from cuts to welfare provision. Death by suicide or the rapid deterioration of existing health conditions is rapidly becoming a normal outcome of welfare cuts, not least through the vicious conditions imposed in work capability assessments. Another distinct pattern of death emerging is the rise in mortality among the elderly, who are dying prematurely at a time when the provision of social care is in steep decline (Dorling, 2017).

The violent effects of austerity are equally bleak and protracted when we examine the everyday practices of our housing institutions. In particular, the ideological attack on social housing tenants has been palpable and indeed had a direct impact on Grenfell Tower tenants. Under conditions of austerity, social housing investment has declined by 60%, social rents in vacant properties have increased by up to 80% of private market rates, and a suite of welfare reforms, such as the Bedroom Tax and Benefit Cap, have targeted social housing tenants disproportionately. Given the impact of these reforms, one Housing Association was initially put on 'suicide watch', following a survey that found 45% of housing staff in the North-West of England had experienced their tenants making suicide threats (Straightforward and Northern Housing Consortium, 2013). Tenants in both the privately rented and social housing sectors have every reason to feel anxious and distressed: these housing reforms send a clear message that they are no longer entitled to the same housing rights and conditions provided under previous governments.

⁹ George Osborne's speech to the 2010 Conservative Party Conference; full speech available online here: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/oct/04/george-osborne-speech-conservative-conference>.

A combination of national and local austerity policies, have culminated in a form of social cleansing (Minton, 2017), that targets working class communities, like people living in North Kensington, and displaces them en masse. Eviction is now the most common weapon routinely used by housing institutions to force out working class families and free-up land value, often involving the forced removal of whole housing estates (Paton and Cooper, 2016). Eviction is, in essence, a violent measure, involving techniques of forced entry and the physical removal of people from their homes carried out by bailiffs and enforcement agents (ibid.). These violent effects also manifest in the build-up to the eviction, where the threat of being evicted induces psychological stress, anxiety and may even trigger the onset of suicidal thoughts (Yerko, 2017).

We argue that Grenfell Tower fire occurred in this context of institutional violence, a context in which the palpable disdain for social housing tenants undoubtedly amplified a culture of negligence and institutional disregard directed at Grenfell tenants. Evidently, this institutional violence is set to continue. By the end of March 2018, 294 Grenfell households, including those from the surrounding area were accommodated in temporary accommodation, some of them left without kitchen facilities or proper living conditions. Grenfell survivors now count towards the 60% increase in the number of homeless families living in temporary accommodation since 2011 (House of Commons 2018). And when they are rehoused, they will not be exempt from the harmful housing policies (e.g Bedroom Tax and Benefit Cap) that have culminated in the violent, forced removal of people from their homes. Despite the scale of harm already done to Grenfell tenants, the everyday, routine institutional violence will continue and Grenfell tenants will still subject to all the same austerity policies and anti-immigration laws, as before.

Conclusion

We should have no difficulty at this point in human history in recognising the intimate relationship between violence and politics. The very long line of 20th century thinkers that have exposed in detail the intrinsically violent foundations of the state's political power include Walter Benjamin (1978), Emma Goldman (2003), Vandana Shiva (1989), Max Weber (2004) and C Wright Mills (2000). Hannah Arendt, whose essay *On Violence* (1970) sought to dissect the relation between political power and the organisation of violence, argued that the use of force to achieve political ends had become so naturalised that the “enormous role that violence plays in human affairs” had become “taken for granted and therefore neglected” (p. 8).

The Grenfell fire represents a rare moment in which the violence of contemporary capitalism comes into full view, for all to see. But in the aftermath, we need to think about how Grenfell is the product of a much larger complex of institutional violence that we are in danger of taking for granted. The ‘bonfire of red tape’, the sustained attack on social housing and the demonization of the tenants of social housing as undeserving, scroungers and so, are constituent elements that caused the fire, just as the particular decisions to cut corners and use cheap materials were.

We can only understand what happened at Grenfell as an institutional chain of events, framed by a neo-liberal politics that promotes the withdrawal of health and safety regulation as an efficient way to ‘improve business’. The neo-liberal politics of austerity permits institutions to increase the vulnerability of working-class communities in order to create new spaces of accumulation. These mundane decisions and targets set by government and administered at institutional level are rarely thought of as violent, but they are. Although the Grenfell Tower fire was an exceptional display of extreme violence, the series of events that led to the fire were routine and mundane – the driving down of costs, undercutting health and safety measures and the systematic refusal to listen to tenants when they warned of the deadly risks they faced. Precisely the same experiences of institutional violence can be found across the

country in countless communities. This is why Grenfell Tower has become such a powerful emblem of austerity Britain.

Bibliography

ARENDRT, H (1970) *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt.

BENJAMIN, J (2017) Grenfell Tower and RBKC – victims of austerity? or exponents of shock doctrine? Research for Action blog, 31st July, 2017. Available online: <https://researchforaction.uk/grenfell-tower-and-rbkc-victim-of-austerity-or-proponent-of-shock-doctrine>

BENJAMIN, W (1978) Critique of Violence. In Demetz, P. (Ed) *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms and Autobiographical Writings*. New York: Schocken.

BOOTH, R. (2017) Failure to rehouse Grenfell survivors 'could worsen mental health. *The Guardian*. 14th December.

BURNETT, J. (2017) Austerity and the Production of Hate. In Cooper, V. and Whyte, D. (2017) (Eds) *The Violence of Austerity*. London: Pluto Press.

CARR, H., COWAN, D., KIRTON-DARLING, E. and BURTONSHAW-GUNN, E (2018) *Closing The Gaps: Health And Safety At Home*, Canterbury and Bristol: Universities of Kent and Bristol, available online at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1457551/2017_11_14_Closing_the_Gaps_-_Health_and_Safety_at_Home.pdf.

CONFORTINI, C (2006). Galtung, violence, and gender: The case for a peace studies/feminism alliance. *Peace and Change*, Vol.31, No.3, p.333–67.

COOPER, V (2015) Austerity as bureaucratized and organized violence Open Democracy. 10th August. Available online at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/vickie-cooper/austerity-as-bureaucratized-and-organized-violence>

COOPER, V and WHYTE, D (eds.) (2017) *The Violence of Austerity*, London: Pluto Press.

DORLING, D (2017). Austerity and Mortality. In Cooper, V. and Whyte, D. (2017) (Eds) *The Violence of Austerity*. London: Pluto Press.

FARMER, P. (2004) An Anthropology of Structural Violence, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 305-325.

GALTUNG, J (1969) Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.6, No.3, p.167–91.

GRAEBER, D (2012) Dead zones of the imagination: On violence, bureaucracy, and interpretive labor. *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p.105–28.

GOLDMAN, E (2003) *My Disillusionment In Russia*. Mineola, New York: Dover.

GUPTA, A. (2012) *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*, Durham And London: Duke University Press.

HOUSE OF COMMONS. (2018) *Briefing Paper, Number 02110: Households in temporary accommodation (England)* London: House of Commons. Available online: <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN02110>

JAMES, P., TOMBS, S., WALTERS, D. AND WHYTE, D. (2018) Submission to the House of Commons Regulatory Reform Committee Inquiry into the Government Deregulation Agenda, Liverpool: Institute of Employment Rights. Available on line: <http://www.ier.org.uk/resources/submission-house-commons-regulatory-reform-committee-inquiry-government-deregulation-agend>

JENSEN, T. and Tyler, I (2015) “Benefits Broods”: The Cultural and Political Crafting of Anti-Welfare Commonsense. *Critical Social Policy*, Vol. 35, No.4, p.470-491.

MINTON, A (2017) *Big Capital: Who is London For?* London: Penguin Books.

NIXON, R. (2013) *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Boston: Harvard University Press.

OSBORNE, G (2010) Financial Statement, Hansard, 22 June. Available online: www.parliament.uk/business/news/2010/06/emergency-budget-2010-statement/

PATON, K AND COOPER, V (2016) It’s the state, stupid: 21st gentrification and state-led evictions, *Sociological Research Online*, 21 (3), 9.

STRAIGHTFORWARD AND NORTHERN HOUSING CONSORTIUM (2013) Impact of Welfare Reform on Housing Employees. Available online: <http://www.straight-forward.co.uk/impact-welfare-reform-housing-employees/>

SHIVA, V (1989) *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India*. London: Zed.

TILLY, C (2003) *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

TOMBS, S (2006) ‘Violence’, Safety Crimes and Criminology. *British Journal of Criminology*. Vol. 47, No. 4, p. 531–550.

TOMBS, S (2016) *Social Protection After the Crisis: regulation without enforcement*, Bristol: Policy Press.

TOMBS, S AND WHYTE, D (2010) *Regulatory Surrender: death, injury and the non-enforcement of law*, London: Institute of Employment Rights.

WEBER, M (2004) *The Vocation Lectures*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

WILMORE, J. (2017) Grenfell Tower: Rydon replaced Leadbitter as contractor. Construction News. 16th June. Available online: <https://www.constructionnews.co.uk/10020848.article?search=https%3a%2f%2fwww.constructionnews.co.uk%2fsearcharticles%3fqsearch%3d1%26keywords%3dGrenfell+Tower%3a+Rydon+replaced+Leadbitter+as+contractor.>

WHYTE, D (2017) Crime as a Social Relationship of Power: Reframing the ‘Ideal Victim’ of Corporate Crimes, in Walklate, S. (ed.) *A Handbook of Victimology*, Abingdon: Routledge.

WRIGHT MILLS, C (2000) *The Power Elite*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

YERKO, R (2017) Evictions and short-term all-cause mortality: a 3-year follow-up study of a middle-aged Swedish population. *International Journal of Public Health*. 62(3): 343–351.

Word count: 4177