

A short history of the London riot

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Politicians and journalists have rushed to blame the riots on 'sheer criminality'. The same cry from the defenders of the status quo has echoed down the centuries after every riot in London.

The 'London mob' has been an object of fear for London's wealthy almost since the city was founded. The size and nature of London made it repeatedly open to radicalization. Large groups of people lived and worked together and developed ideas against authority in a way which there was much less opportunity to do in rural areas or small towns. As a seat of government, London was the natural centre of protest against monarchy and then parliament.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 ended in London when the citizens opened the gates of the capital and allowed tens of thousands of peasants led by John Ball and Wat Tyler to enter (and ransack) the City. They burnt down John of Gaunt's palace at the Savoy and executed the Lord Chancellor as part of their protest at the poll tax. They broke open the most notorious prisons in the City. Then, as now, some innocents (in this case Flemish cloth traders perceived as commercial rivals) were victims. The peasants forced the King to grant them their freedom until the leaders of the revolt were tricked by Richard II and routed at Smithfield. But the revolt burnt itself into the mind of the aristocracy and the poll tax was effectively abolished.

The new religion of Protestantism, strongest in those parts of Europe which showed the beginnings of capitalist production, developed in London from the 1500s onwards. The preachers, tracts and pamphlets of the new religion were popular among Londoners in a time when political debate was framed very much in religious terms and the actions of kings and aristocrats measured in language of theology. The lead up to the English revolution of 1641 onwards saw a growing radicalization in London. Some of the key motors of revolutionary advance in this period were the women who besieged parliament as the revolutionary crisis grew, and the London apprentices adopted the most revolutionary ideas and actions of the era. The King was forced to flee London by the actions of the crowd. The Royalists never regained the initiative in the capital and it was lost to them for the rest of the Revolution. The impetus for the execution of the King after the second civil war came from London and the most radical layers within it. These too provided much of the base for the Levellers, the most important part of the left within the revolution, and support for its leaders such as John Lilburne and Richard Overton. Lilburne himself had been an apprentice and he often addressed himself to the 'apron youths' of the City. These were precisely those people, young and without settled employment, that formed the most militant sections of the crowd.

But the London crowd really came into its own in the 18th century. What was sometimes called the London mob, a term for the mass crowd which assembles in London over a wide variety of issues, was capable of laying siege to parliament, demonstrating, rioting, and attacking the rich. The mob was also a means of communication where news and information seem to spread like wildfire. The term 'mob' comes from the Latin term *mobile vulgus*, coined in the 18th century to describe the laboring poor. Historian Peter Linebaugh has suggested that it could be translated as 'movement', which puts it in the context of protest. The campaign in the mid 18th century in support of the MP

John Wilkes and his attempts to be reelected as an MP while king and parliament did their best to stop him saw repeated mobilization of the mob, their cry being 'Wilkes and Liberty'. In one of the many riots of this time the mob smashed the windows of the Mansion House in the city and indeed every wealthy house that refused to show support for Wilkes. There was a complex relationship between the mob and sections of the upper and middle classes some of whom at least partly licensed and tolerated it for their own political ends: 'the Londoners who mobbed the carriages and broke the windows of the Great knew...that they were acting under licence.'

Gordon Riots

Most famous of the actions of the 18th century 'mob' were the Gordon riots of 1780. The riots remain the subject of much controversy but there is little doubt that they represented the authentic voice of the mob. They followed a demonstration to parliament to present a petition against Catholic toleration - a constant fear of the London Protestants from the Restoration onwards. Many of the crowd were respectable and Dissenters, led by Scottish aristocrat Lord George Gordon. The demonstration turned angry when the House of Commons refused to debate the petition and some sections of the crowd - the apprentices, servants and journeymen, in other words the poorest, as well as some criminals and prostitutes, turned to rioting. The crushing of the Gordon Riots, with hundreds killed by troops and some hanged, marked the last of the great 18th century outings of the mob, although it has never entirely disappeared. Indeed it may be, for all the differences in composition and politics over the centuries, one of the most enduring forms of radical popular protest.

The impact of the French revolution on London helped to change the nature of protest. The threat to privilege and property which erupted across the channel in 1789 shook the British ruling class and events over the next four years frightened them even further as monarchy and aristocracy were overthrown and executed. Those in support of the left of the French revolution, the Jacobins, found the political atmosphere increasingly patriotic and conservative. The background of revolutionary war across Europe being waged by the French led to the scapegoating of the 'enemy within'. From 1792 onwards, 'Church and King' mobs were licenced by magistrates and clergy although they never caught the popular imagination. In London they never took off. When the Jacobin prisoners were acquitted in 1794, there were popular celebrations in London. According to Edward Thompson, 'In 1795 the London crowd was revolutionary in mood and (through the London Corresponding Society) was discovering new forms of organization and leadership.'

The French wars and this period of repression of politics marked a watershed. Never again did the city's political elite licence the mob to behave in this way. By the early 19th century with the preeminence of British capitalism and the growth of an industrial working class the dividing lines were drawn and the aldermen and politicians could not risk the assault on property and the rule of law that this would entail. Indeed the first half of the century saw the establishment of a London police force. But the mob did not entirely disappear, resurfacing with the unemployed demonstrations in 1886, when window smashing in Pall Mall frightened the extremely wealthy ruling class at signs of the poor rising up. It surfaced in the mass strikes of 1888 and 1889, and in the great unrest of 1910-14. This time however it was channeled into a growing and militant labour movement. It surfaced again in the 1930s with the major unemployed demonstrations, many of which turned into riots when attacked by the police.

In 1981 the young blacks of London (along with their counterparts in other parts of the country) rose up against racism and oppression, rioting in Brixton and being joined by their white counterparts in this and other working class areas. In 1990 the mass demonstration against the Poll Tax turned into a riot across central London, which, along with mass non payment of the tax, succeeded eventually in getting rid of Margaret Thatcher and of the tax itself. London was a centre of opposition to the

Tories' poll tax, introduced in England in 1990. Riots took place outside town halls in many of the working class areas such as Hackney and Islington as the sheer anti working class bias of the tax became apparent. In March 1990 around 200,000 marched through central London and rioting broke out around Whitehall and Trafalgar Square. Demonstrators were brutally attacked by police who pursued them throughout the theatre area and Soho.

The demonstrations of students at the end of 2010 showed many of the characteristics of the traditional mob - large numbers of young and relatively poor people gathered quickly, the use of new media allowed them to communicate from the furthest suburbs to central London, thus breaking down some of the difficulties for organising presented by the geographical spread of London, they expressed an unrelenting opposition to the government and elite, they targeted hated buildings (Tory HQ and the Treasury). They were of course denounced for violent and criminal behaviour, just like their predecessors, but it was clear from the waves of support they received from many Londoners that they spoke for much of the city.

Eruptions of anger have always resulted in repression, and law has repeatedly been used to control those who rebel against authority, most often the young. Black and Asian young people were targeted by the racist SUS laws (arresting on suspicion) in the 1970s and 80s. Today blacks and Asians are 26 times more likely to be stopped and searched than whites . London's long history of riot is partly a result of its sheer size, partly a result of the fact that rich and poor live side by side to a degree unusual elsewhere, partly because London is the seat of government, and partly it is a result of the concentration of young people in (for long periods) relatively small workplaces. The rise of the labour movement from Chartism in the first half of the 19th century imparted a more organized form of action to the mob unions, strikes, political parties, political campaigns. But these never encompassed all the working class and riot was often combined with these other forms of resistance.

Now the anger in society is reaching new levels and the traditional Labour movement has less purchase on the forms of resistance than it has had for a generation. Riot is one result. It is always a blunt political instrument. Some consciously riot for political reasons. Some are impelled to riot for economic and political reasons which are only partly present in their consciousness. Others join in for very different reasons. But riots never just happen. Neither are they the product of some sudden and mysterious decision by criminals to organize a mass society wide excuse to rob Debenhams. The riot always has social and economic roots and it is always a protest by the excluded and the poor against the conditions forced on them by the rich and powerful.

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P.S.

* From Countefire, TUESDAY, 09 AUGUST 2011 17:39:

<http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/75-our-history/14476--a-short-history-of-the-london-riot>

* Lindsey German and John Rees are the authors of a forthcoming book on A People's History of London to be published by Verso in 2012.