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# **Racist riots in context (Britain:) The horror in the heart of the farce**

Monday 12 August 2024, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2024).

**[For more than ten days or so, several towns in the UK have been the scene of racist riots targeting mosques, businesses run by Muslims and refugee centres. The riots began after the murder of three young girls in the coastal town of Southport on 29 July and the spread of false information attributing the crime to a Muslim migrant.**

**ESSF]**

Britannia dreams of its own downfall. In the space of a few days, the country was gripped by two sequences of hallucinatory reaction, based on false inferences about someone's identity. In the case of the Algerian boxer Imane Khelif's victory over Italy's Angela Carini, the suburban Mumsnet wing of reaction decided that Khelif was a deviant masculine interloper in a women's space. Britain's culture secretary Lisa Nandy declared herself 'uncomfortable' about the match, and gestured vaguely to biological complexities. Even some credulous leftists were willingly pulled along in the furies' wake.

Even more ominously, in response to a terrifying stabbing attack on eleven children and two adults at a Taylor Swift dance class in Southport, in which three of the children were killed, thousands of people across the UK assumed that the suspect was a migrant who arrived on a 'small boat' and had been on an 'MI6 watch list'. Because the suspect was under eighteen, his identity was not initially released to the public. Within less than 24 hours, the rumours from the usual rightist disinformation accounts were up and running, signal-boosted by Tommy Robinson and Andrew Tate, and pushed disproportionately by accounts based in the United States.

This pattern of coalescing waves of online agitation cresting towards momentary rallying points for the right is typical of the social industry. But, after years of deliberate culture war theatrics in which the Conservatives inveighed against a migrant 'invasion' and pledged to 'stop the boats', and the rightist press drilled the public with shots of adrenaline about the threat of 'mass immigration', and after an election campaign in which the Labour opposition accused the government of being too "liberal" on immigration and promised to escalate deportations, and following hard upon a large far-right rally in central London addressed by Robinson, this shitstorm spilled into meatspace.

As with the racist riot in Knowsley last year, the violence in Southport, where gangs of men attacked a local mosque, was not driven or organised by fascists, though members of groups like Patriotic Alternative were there. Most of those who took part were local, disorganised racists. There followed a cycle of riots in Whitehall, Hull, Sunderland, Rotherham, Liverpool, Aldershot, Leeds, Middlesbrough, Tamworth, Belfast, Bolton, Doncaster and Manchester. In Rotherham, they set fire to a hotel housing asylum seekers. In Middlesbrough, they blocked roads and only let traffic through if the drivers were verified as "white" and "English", thus briefly enjoying the combined petty power of the traffic warden and the border official. In Tamworth, they rampaged through

refugee accommodation and left, in the ruins, graffiti reading: "England", "Fuck Pakis" and "Get Out". In Hull, as crowds dragged a man out of his car for a beating, participants shouted "kill them!" In Belfast, where a hijabi was punched in the face while holding her baby, they destroyed Muslim shops and tried to march on the local mosque, chanting "get them out". In Crosby, near Liverpool, a Muslim man was stabbed.

The fragments of the extant far-right played an organising role, but it was secondary. Many of the protests they called were poorly attended and easily outnumbered by an antifascist response. In Doncaster, only one person showed up to a scheduled protest. The sinister reality is that the riots, far from being caused by the far-right, provided them with their best milieu for recruitment and radicalisation in years. The protests drew crowds of anomic, politically alienated, racist grandmothers and fash-curious youths, often from declining regions, most of them probably a lot worse off than the petty bourgeois grifters and millionaire spivs inciting them, many of whom either didn't vote in the last election (when turnout was at a record low), or voted for Reform UK out of a long-ingulcated desire to punish the migratory and rebellious. Not all of them were there to riot or pogrom, and some of the far-right's base is still deferential to law and order, notwithstanding Farage's griping about 'two-tier policing'. This will be why Robinson felt the need to distance himself from the riots having initially championed them. However, for those fascist elements present who knew what they were doing, the decisive factor would have been the discovery of a critical mass of young men ready for the adventure of violence.

As ever, the 'legitimate concerns' brigade includes a well-heeled faction of the lumpencommentariat, such as Carole Malone, Matthew Goodwin, Dan Wootton and Allison Pearson. Notably, however, these 'concerns' aren't about the 'bread and butter' issues that many leftists seem to think will defuse racist agitation: as I've said many times before, it isn't the economy, stupid. What the two recent moral panics have in common is the coprological image of matter out of place: borders and boundaries eroding and people being where they ought not to be. As was proven when the court revealed that the suspect is a British minor and the riots persisted, it doesn't matter what 'the facts' are: we can't 'fact-check' this phenomenon into oblivion. It would be instructive to ask one of these 'whiteness' or 'Englishness' rioters what they would have done had the suspect been white. One of the rationalisations of rioters claiming not to be racist was that, because the suspect killed children, he was not properly British because killing children is against 'British values'. But even if it was conceivable that they would still have rioted over a white man killing children, what would they have been rioting for? What would have been their targets? The local Wetherspoons?

It is worth considering how these rumours work historically. In 1919, in East St Louis, Illinois, a racist massacre was sparked by the false rumour that local black people were plotting to murder and rape thousands of whites. In Orléans in 1969, Jewish shops were attacked by rioters inflamed by the salacious story that Jewish merchants had been drugging female customers and selling them into slavery. In 2002, the unsubstantiated claim that Muslims had firebombed a train with Hindu pilgrims aboard became a pretext for a gruesome carnival of Islamophobic mass murder and rape. As Terry Ann Knopf documents in her history of racist rumours and riots in the United States, these mobilisations work precisely by dispensing with "secure standards of evidence", because the detail and speculation regarding extraordinary events - actual or imagined - function as nodes around which an already active racist fantasy life congeals. In those circumstances of emergency, again real or perceived, official sources are actively distrusted (only sheeple trust the 'mainstream media'), and unofficial 'eyewitnesses' or 'experts' attain momentarily sanctified status. Distortion at fourth hand becomes method. What matters is what the fantasy licenses, what it enables to happen. In this case, it allowed people to realise their revenge fantasies.

And yet, these movements are also entirely parasitic on the mainstream, official sources they distrust. How can it be, after all, that the BBC can report on one such Robinsonade as a "pro-British

march” and repeatedly refer to rioters innocuously as “protesters” while on ITV Zahra Sultana is scorned by a white panel for bringing up Islamophobia and news anchors describe Muslims engaged in self-defence as “masked people shouting Allahu Akbar”? How can it be that, as in France, the political centre’s most plausibly ‘populist’ moments are those wherein it attempts to outflank the fascists on race, migration, and the ‘Muslim question’? Nothing could be more impeccably bourgeois and conformist in this day and age than the racial metaphysics of the far-right.

The resonant core of the ideology interpellating and assembling these racist crowds is the idea of bordering. The interwar European far-right was colonial in its outlook, its utopianism transpiring from the idea of territorial expansion. Today’s ethnonationalist far-right is largely defensive, preoccupied with decline and victimisation, and in Europe and North America with the prospect of ‘white extinction’. Yet many of its main tactical and ideological innovations come, not from the historic centres of capital accumulation, but from the global South: the canary in the coalmine was not the regional drama of Brexit, but the Gujarat pogrom. It is time, once again, to provincialise Europe; indeed, this horrible saga is part of the process of Europe provincializing itself even as it struggles to retain global power. There is a direct relationship between Fortress Europe’s bloody borders, its expanding militarism, and ethnochauvinist blowback. And nowhere could be more parochial than a declining Ukania pathetically trying to ‘punch above its weight’ in the world, even as it expands the apparatuses of border sadism and addresses its subjects in the language of ethnic absolutism.

While these disgusting eruptions were taking place in England, I was over in Ireland, at an ecosocialist summer camp in Glendalough. I heard from local antifascist organisers, who had recently had to cope with similar contagions, similarly enabled by the bourgeois politicians and press. There seemed to be three common threads. The first was that, tactically, when one was trying to drive a wedge between the fascists and their racist audience, it didn’t help to start out by talking about the ‘far right’. The question of fascism could hardly be avoided but one had to get there by starting, first, by talking concretely about what these people actually represent. Otherwise many of the people one wanted to sway would take it as moralistic bullying and even proudly adopt terms like ‘far right’ for themselves. The second was that, in terms of immediate political interventions, it sometimes was more helpful to have rapid response committees rooted in local communities able to flexibly defend people under attack than to march activists in from the cities whom no one knows. We do need large mobilisations, but they are rallying points for further action. The third was that, it is absolutely useless to decode plebeian racist violence as a distorted expression of ‘material interests’ and try to circumvent it by organising about something else like water or housing. Because this did nothing to tackle the underlying racism.

It’s the last point I want to conclude on. I have argued at great, repetitive length, that we need to stop thinking ‘bread and butter’ issues will solve this. Bread and butter is good. We all like bread and butter. But we don’t *love* it. If you love your children, it isn’t because they increase your spending power, energy and free time. You love them, among other things, because of their needfulness, because of the sacrifices you must make for them. Conversely, it is unsurprising that most people, most of the time, don’t vote with their wallets. The idea that this is a peculiar pathology only evinced by Brexit supporters or Trump voters is nonsense. What we hate is not sacrifice, but the gruelling sense of humiliation, defeat and failure. Faced with that, we’ll do almost anything for a win. We need to go back to the theory of the passions as, in Marxist terms, humanity’s relationship to its object.

Specifically, we need to consider, in the context of relentless social comparison, steepening class inequality, a culture of extolment of winners and sadism toward losers, and of the increasingly toxic psychological consequences of failure, the persecutory and vengeful passions secreted by the social body. Rather than simply blaming disinformation, or scapegoating Russian interference or the ‘Israel

lobby', we need to think about how disinformation campaigns leverage those wayward passions, and turn them into political weapons. We need to consider how the engorged excitement of these rioters, their enthralment at the spectre of catastrophe and annihilation, is in part an alternative to the pervasive affects of paralysis and depression borne of a dying civilization.

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**P.S.**

- "The horror in the heart of the farce". Patreon. 6 août 2024:  
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