

London: Why here, why now?

Friday 12 August 2011, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 9 August 2011).

Why is it that the same areas always erupt first, whatever the cause? Pure accident? Might it have something to do with race and class and institutionalised poverty and the sheer grimness of everyday life? The coalition politicians (including new New Labour, who might well sign up to a national government if the recession continues apace) with their petrified ideologies can't say that because all three parties are equally responsible for the crisis. They made the mess.

They privilege the wealthy. They let it be known that judges and magistrates should set an example by giving punitive sentences to protesters found with peashooters. They never seriously question why no policeman is ever prosecuted for the 1000-plus deaths in custody since 1990. Whatever the party, whatever the skin colour of the MP, they spout the same clichés. Yes, we know violence on the streets in London is bad. Yes, we know that looting shops is wrong. But why is it happening now? Why didn't it happen last year? Because grievances build up over time, because when the system wills the death of a young black citizen from a deprived community, it simultaneously, if subconsciously, wills the response.

And it might get worse if the politicians and the business elite, with the support of the tame state television and Murdoch networks, fail to deal with the economy, and punish the poor and the less well-off for government policies they have been promoting for more than three decades. Dehumanising the 'enemy', at home or abroad, creating fear and imprisonment without trial cannot work for ever.

Were there a serious political opposition party in this country it would be arguing for dismantling the shaky scaffolding of the neo-liberal system before it crumbles and hurts even more people. Throughout Europe, the distinguishing features that once separated centre-left from centre-right, conservatives from social democrats, have disappeared. The sameness of official politics dispossesses the less privileged segments of the electorate, the majority.

The young unemployed or semi-employed blacks in Tottenham and Hackney, Enfield and Brixton know full well that the system is stacked against them. The politicians' braying has no real impact on most people, let alone those lighting the fires in the streets. The fires will be put out. There will be some pathetic inquiry or other to ascertain why Mark Duggan was shot dead, regrets will be expressed, there will be flowers from the police at the funeral. The arrested protesters will be punished and everyone will heave a sigh of relief and move on till it happens again.

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P.S.

* <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2011/08/09/tariq-ali/why-here-why-now/>