

Riots in Great Britain: the voice of the powerless

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The response to the wave of riots that swept England this week is finely balanced between those denouncing the rioters as hooligans and those talking about poverty and police harassment. Neil Faulkner looks at the causes and consequences.

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‘Mob rule’. ‘Wanton destruction’. ‘Mindless thuggery’. ‘Sheer criminality’. Media, politicians, and police always say the same about urban riots.

Lacking political organisation, riots can indeed spin out of control and engulf ordinary people. But that does not alter the fact that they are rooted in social oppression. Criminals may take advantage of riots, but they do not cause them. Criminals work in secret, not as armies of street-fighters.

Riots have been a feature of capitalist society since its inception. Indeed, they go back much further, to earlier forms of class society. Modern urban riots represent the continuation of an older ‘pre-capitalist’ tradition of popular protest [1].

Mass rioting erupted on demonstrations against unemployment in Central London in both the 1880s and the 1930s, a wave of riots swept Britain’s inner-cities in 1981, and the revolt against the poll-tax saw rioting outside local town-halls and a mass riot in the West End in 1989.

The events in Tottenham, Hackney, Croydon, Birmingham, Manchester, and a dozen other urban areas over the last few days are not some sinister eruption of an underclass of criminals equipped with BlackBerries moving from one hot-spot to another. They are explosions of anger over lives blighted by poverty.

The long history of riots proves that their organisation does not depend on electronic social-networks. And the vast majority of the rioters on the streets in each area are local youths.

Fuck the Feds

What is clear, moreover, is that the police are the primary targets. ‘The moral of the story is “Fuck the Feds”,’ said one Tottenham youth questioned by a journalist about the riots.

Hundreds of youths on Hackney's Pembury estate were eager to bring on a fight with the police. One man was seen spraying 'Fuck Da Police' on a wall in red paint. Another shouted, 'Come and get us, man,' as he hurled a bottle. 'We ain't going nowhere,' declared a third; 'this is our estate.' A fourth explained, 'I've been wanting to see us do this to the Feds for years.'

Festering hatred of the police on rundown working-class estates, above all among black youth, has been largely invisible to mainstream politicians and media, but is easy enough to understand for anyone interested in finding out.

Youth unemployment across Britain is currently running at one in five. Across London, it is closer to one in four. Among Afro-Caribbean youth, the proportion is much higher: barely half have jobs.

Capitalist crisis always works this way. Those who have jobs hold onto them if they can. It is young workers coming into the job market for the first time who face the grimmest job prospects. And among them, because of racial disadvantage and discrimination, young black workers find it hardest of all.

Con-Dem Cuts

Because of this, even those in employment are likely to be in low-paid, dead-end jobs: it is all they can get. At the same time, educational opportunities are being shut down by abolition of the EMA (Education Maintenance Grant) and university fees soaring to £9,000 a year. And with rents and house prices at record levels, any hope of moving out of overcrowded family homes and setting up independently can appear a distant prospect.

Meantime, councils are implementing massive cuts. Haringey (which covers Tottenham) has just agreed £84 million cuts in a £273 million budget, including 75% cuts in its Youth Service and the closure of 8 out of 13 Youth Centres.

All of this is set to get much worse. The Con-Dem programme of cuts and privatisation has only just begun, and, with the global financial system hovering on the brink of a second crash and a double-dip recession, some economists are talking about two decades of austerity before the debt hangover is worked off.

With good reason, 'Fuck Cameron' was sprayed on at least one wall in a riot zone. The riots are not 'apolitical'. They may be spontaneous, chaotic, and leaderless; they may be focused on fighting the police, breaking windows, and looting shops; but that does not mean that they are not fuelled by a deep sense of injustice.

The anti-capitalist mood of the last decade has entered the pores of working-class Britain. Bankers awarding themselves 20% pay rises and million-pound bonuses out of taxpayers' money has made riots more likely. Politicians fiddling their expenses and police taking bribes from tabloid journalists have made riots more likely. A society riddled with grotesque and growing inequality has made riots more likely.

In the depths of society, mostly hidden from view, in millions of homes on bleak estates, there is an accumulation of frustration, alienation, and bitter resentment. And a raw cutting-edge of this discontent is to be found in relations between young people and the police.

Their system, their crisis, their police

The role of the police in capitalist society is to protect property and maintain order so that exploitation and capital accumulation can proceed unhindered. The police operate en masse to contain collective working-class resistance, and routinely to suppress everyday petty crime and disorder in working-class areas.

It is inherent in the role of the police that they target the most oppressed sections of the working class, for the simple reason that the poorest are those most likely to be driven to petty-crime and disorder.

This is the root of the current moral panic over 'gang culture' and 'knife crime'. There is no serious attempt to analyse the social conditions which foster these problems, and certainly no political will to provide real solutions. Instead, fears of a dangerous 'underclass' are mobilised in support of repressive policing of black youth on rundown estates.

Police harassment of working-class youth, especially if they are black, is completely routine. Veteran black activist Darcus Howe reports that his 15-year-old grandson cannot count the number of times he has been stopped and searched. In Haringey, two-thirds of those stopped are under 25, and you are three times more likely to have this happen if you are black.

A Hackney youth worker, surveying the damage on Tuesday this week, talked of seeing harassment all the time and of 'police officers jumping out of vans, calling 18-year-olds bitches and niggers'.

'It's bloody hard for these kids,' he continued. 'There's nothing to do at all. University fees have gone up. Education costs money. And there's no jobs. This is them sending out a message.'

Riots are explosions of socio-economic discontent. But they require a trigger. And again and again, the trigger is provided by the police. Often, it is a police murder, or what appears as such. It was the death of Cynthia Jarrett that triggered the Broadwater Farm riot in Tottenham in 1985, and it was the shooting of Mark Duggan that triggered the Tottenham riot last weekend. Behind the immediate trigger is years of experience of the corruption, racism, and violence of the police.

A chaotic release of social tension

Once it starts, there is a tremendous release of tension. Rioting seems like fun: it is exhilarating and cathartic. Humdrum lives are suddenly full of excitement and spectacle. Usually, there is powerlessness in the face of the bullying, rip-offs, and frustrations of everyday life. But in a riot this is replaced by feelings of solidarity, community, and collective strength. Temporary control of the streets can be experienced as a moment of heady-hazed liberation.

That control provides a rare opportunity to take that which is usually denied. The corporate targets of the rioters read like a roll-call of neoliberal retail capital: McDonalds and Starbucks; JD Sports and LA Fitness; Comet and PC World; Currys, Sony, and Carphone Warehouse. The riot was a chance for the poor to help themselves to the iPods, laptops, flatscreen TVs, and designer clothes and footwear that are daily invited to buy but cannot afford.

And the riot is empowering in another way. When the ruling class loses control of its urban heartlands - when there is fighting, looting, and burning on the streets - it grows scared and pays attention.

That is why politicians are jetting back from their luxury holidays to chair public-order summits and host press conferences. It also explains why Scotland Yard has issued a belated apology to the Duggan family. Expect more such gestures, and possibly reviews of policing, social deprivation, and cuts programmes.

On the other hand – depending largely on how the public debate pans out – the state may be able to use the riots to justify water-cannon, rubber bullets, draconian sentences, and even more heavy-handed policing of working-class estates.

Riots can be double-edged, and the reaction to them can go in different directions.

Up like a rocket, down like a stick

As a form of popular resistance, rioting has strict limits and great dangers. Because it is not based on political organisation, it is always fleeting. A riot rises like a rocket and falls like stick. It issues a warning and wins some space, but any gains are likely to be momentary if there is nothing more.

Worse, because the riot is only powerful as long as it lasts, and because the rioters disperse to their homes when it is over, it leaves the police free to seek revenge. The state is far too powerful to be defeated by local street-fighters. It is bound to regain control of the streets after a riot. When it does so, further mass arrests and a long succession of show-trials may be the outcome.

Since the student revolt of late last year, the militarisation of policing and the criminalisation of protest have gathered momentum. A real danger now is that the rioters will be hounded, seized, and, in many cases, banged up for long periods. This will chime with the ‘law and order’ rhetoric by which our rulers seek to explain the riots and deny their social content and political significance.

Riots lend themselves to such interpretation. Because they are spontaneous, unplanned, and leaderless, they can quickly lose direction and become indiscriminate. This, clearly, has happened. Many small shops have been trashed. Often they are owned by ethnic-minority proprietors. Often they are owned by people who put up anti-war posters and stock anti-cuts leaflets.

Criminal gangs can use riots to loot for gain. This, too, has undoubtedly happened. Again, small traders suffer as well as corporate retail.

Fires may consume both small businesses and working-class homes. And, in the chaos of the riot, innocent bystanders may get beaten up, even, as we now learn, killed.

Because riots can result in indiscriminate attacks on local community targets, they can quickly degenerate into vigilantism and sectarian strife. On Monday night, the police turned part of Hackney into a ‘sterile area’ and allowed the ransacking of small shops to proceed. A group of around a hundred Turkish and Kurdish men are reported to have responded by arming themselves in self-defence against the rioters.

Rioting creates the possibility of splits inside working-class communities, an audience for ‘law and order’ rhetoric, and backing for a police crackdown.

The riots and the Left

These dangers impose serious responsibilities on the Left. We have to do three things.

First, we have to explain the class nature of the riots – the fact that they are rooted in unemployment, poverty, and oppression, and that they are triggered by the corruption, racism, and violence of the police.

Argument is raging across Britain, especially in the riot zones, and perhaps above all among the crowds involved in the local ‘clean-ups’. The argument is often finely balanced between those denouncing the rioters as hooligans and those talking about poverty and police harassment. Often enough, the same person deplores the devastation, but in the next sentence says, like one young woman in Hackney, ‘But maybe it’s a cry for help as well. People are doing it to be noticed, because there’s a problem.’

We have to put the argument about the real causes, and then, second, we have to link the problems of poverty and policing with the wider crisis of the system of which they are part. The experience of black youth unemployment and of racist, increasingly paramilitary policing cannot be separated from the financial crash, the deepening global slump, and the political corruption of the neoliberal elite.

Third, to prevent divide and rule, to ensure that working-class communities do not turn in on themselves, we have to transform anger and alienation into united mass resistance. That requires organisation.

Riots are the voice of the powerless. But, in relation to the power of the state and corporate capital, they are as a blunderbuss against a tank. Also, because of their unpredictable character, they can backfire on ordinary people, local communities, and the rioters themselves.

Popular protest tends to take this form of a riot when there is no other. Like now. The unions are much weakened, the strike rate remains rock-bottom, and the official leaderships are shackled by anti-union laws they are not prepared to break. The Labour Party has been hollowed out by neoliberalism and become an unashamed representative of the rich and big business. This creates a political vacuum on our side. The riots – for what will prove a brief moment – have filled it.

What we need is a mass movement to unite the entire resistance to the Con-Dem regime and its programme of cuts and privatisation. We need a framework for pulling all the struggles together and giving direction and purpose to every act of revolt from below.

Riots sometimes point the way to bigger and better things. Many of those who rioted in Central London in 1886 and 1887 were then involved in the wave of ‘New Unionism’ that swept the East End in 1889. The inner-city riots of 1981 were followed by some of the greatest class battles of 20th century British history, and though most went down to defeat, the decade ended with a spectacular victory in the Poll Tax Revolt – one which overturned a regressive local tax and led directly to the fall of Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The riots represent the voice of the oppressed, but we must beware their limits and their dangers. We must seek to harness the anger and alienation they represent in a class-wide mass movement against crisis and austerity. It is the Coalition of Resistance that currently appears to offer the most promising vehicle for achieving that.

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P.S.

* From Countefire, 11 AUGUST 2011 16:12:

<http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/theory/37-theory/14483-riots-the-voice-of-the-powerless>

Footnotes

[1] See John Rees and Lindsey German's article [>art22625] available on ESSF (article 22625).