

Shock Horror: Rioters Cause Riots! Criminals Cause Crime!

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So now we know: the interim report of the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel discovered, after talking to a few people, that “there was no one single motivating factor for the riots. We heard of motivations from the need for new trainers to a desire to attack society” (Singh, 2011: 12). This superficial verdict is only partially redeemed by such additional observations as that most convicted rioters were not gang members and that up to a third of under-18s who came before the courts had not committed previous offences. But these and other statistics were already well known and aired in the media. The fact is that the nearest thing to an official inquiry into last August’s riots tells us very little we did not already know. The inquiry was the outcome neither of systematic social research nor a high profile mobilisation of leading practitioners and social planners. The real tasks of research into the riots have been left to the private and voluntary sectors - notably the consortium of the LSE, The Guardian, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Open Society Foundations.

This fact itself, the lack of a systematic public inquiry, is the real key to what has been taking place. David Cameron originally did not want an inquiry. The appointment of the head of Jobcentre Plus to lead the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel was arguably the result of pressure from Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband. Cameron, having characterised the riots as an ‘outbreak of mindless criminality’, did not see much point in an inquiry which would either show that criminals cause crime or, if it started talking about causes, might lead to dangerous critiques of the neoliberal project upon which the Coalition government is based.

The contrast with the Scarman report into the 1981 riots could not be more stark. In the aftermath to rioting in Brixton (South London) followed by disturbances in Liverpool and the Midlands, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher voiced sentiments not dissimilar to Cameron’s. However, this did not prevent her liberal Home Secretary, Willie Whitelaw from commissioning Lord Scarman, a leading liberal judge with all the accompanying gravitas, to conduct a systematic public inquiry. Two aspects of Scarman’s report would be most unwelcome in government circles today. Firstly, his conclusion that the rioters did indeed have a legitimate grievance. Systematic aggressive over-policing of young blacks, epitomised by massive disproportionalities in stop and search had led to the belief that rioting, “though wrong, is a very effective means of protest” (Scarman, 1981: para 2.38). In the current climate he would be simply shouted down. The second thing Scarman recommended was that “in order to secure social stability there will be a long term need to provide useful, gainful employment and suitable educational, recreational and leisure opportunities for young people, especially in the inner city” (Scarman, 1981: para 6.29).

Of course this interventionist Welfare State Keynesianism was already out-dated. What we got instead was the visit to Liverpool by environment secretary Michael Heseltine aiming to attract private investment to urban regeneration. The result was a renewal of the city centre based on middle class consumption, while poor riot-torn areas like Toxteth were largely ignored. Liverpool, as writers like Roy Coleman and Anna Minton have documented, has become “one of the most segregated and security-conscious places in the country” (Minton, 2008: 4). Neoliberal urban renewal (dominated by private investment and the free market) was clearing out the young, the poor and unemployed. Rather than trying to counter these tendencies, governments helped out with diminishing workfare benefits, ASBOs, CCTV and private security guards. The foundations for the next wave of riots were being laid.

The riots in Bradford and other West Yorkshire towns in 2001 were the final death of Scarman's Keynesian approach. His 'how did we fail to integrate these communities?' was replaced, in the various reports on the riots (each town had its own report, written by a public sector bureaucrat) by 'how did these communities fail to succeed in local labour markets?'. Whites and Asians needed to stop fighting each other over the dregs of the collapsing Yorkshire steel and textile industries and develop 'community cohesion'. That is, they had to become more entrepreneurial and attract new business (Cantle, 2001).

New Labour, now in power, had adopted the neoliberal agenda. It was ready to intervene, but not with state-led employment generation. Rather a battery of community renewal and cohesion initiatives came forth which did little to reverse the trends to social polarisation, social exclusion and the growth of the 'precarariat' in which a growing army of NEETS (not in employment, education or training) found themselves: a toxic mixture of unemployment, low wage, insecure dead end work, a punitive police and 'workfare state'.

There are some key differences which can be identified between the recent riots and the previous ones discussed above. Firstly, the rioters themselves. All the previous ingredients can of course be found: massive alienation from and hatred of the police. Rather than superficial comments (of which the media are full) to the effect that these rioters had criminal convictions so of course they hated the police, it might be more worthwhile to ponder why so little has changed in the relationship between the police and young people in deprived areas in the thirty years since the Scarman report. Could it be that, in some respects, the situation has got worse? Among rioters interviewed (by the Guardian researchers in particular) there was certainly anger and resentment against stop and search, today as in Scarman's time. But the resentment seems more diffuse, not simply police disrespect or disproportional stopping of young blacks, but a much more generalised notion of battle against the police for the control of public space. "We rioted to show the police we could" was a frequent comment.

In a similar way, while there was plenty of looting in Brixton in 1981 it was largely people taking advantage of the chaos. In last August's riots 'taking stuff' was much more systematic. For many it was the main thing. If neoliberalism had told people that they were utterly worthless except in terms of their power as consumers then here was the revolt of what Zygmunt Bauman has called the 'failed consumer'. But underlying all this was a huge reservoir of rage and hatred directed not just at the police, or big stores, but at 'everything' that has condemned thousands of young people to utterly worthless lives and denied them even the dignity that comes from a lifetime in the service of capitalism. "Have you any regrets?" a rioter was asked in the excellent Newsnight film by Paul Lewis (BBC Newsnight, 5/12/2011). "Yes, that I didn't do more damage. That I didn't burn down a police station." This is politics alright. But not the sort any of us, at least in Britain, have seen for a very long time.

This brings us back, finally, to government's reluctance to concede an inquiry. There is in fact a symmetry between Cameron's view of the riots as 'mindless criminality' and the notion of a revolt against 'everything', what Slavoj Žižek described as 'zero-degree' protest. The latter, in the mind of a conservative, can only appear as the former. As soon as we start letting loose academics and other busybodies to opine about causes, then this mindless revolt against everything is broken down into specific things that have gone wrong - with economic and social policy, with education and with policing and criminal justice - and before you know it we have specific remedies being proposed and the danger is we are back with Scarman and a high profile media debate about state-led investment in jobs and education.

This is simply not possible (though Keynesians would disagree) in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s - or even in the history of capitalism. The Coalition government is in the middle of a programme of massive public spending cuts, from which the criminal justice agencies are not excluded. So what, in my opinion, the government is doing is trying to maintain a focus on those forms of remedy in which social investment can be effectively replaced by private and voluntary

sector initiatives. That is why, in the face of nearly all the evidence, there is still a focus on gangs and individual problem families. These are the sorts of micro-problems that could conceivably be targeted by non-state agencies.

But the real danger is this. The lack of anything resembling a serious attempt to stop the rot and create a future for an expanding population of unemployed young people has left the ground clear for a continued emphasis on policing and repression. In all riots the policing issues usually dominate the early post-riot debates. This was true of Scarman, even though he did make some attempt to attribute a measure of responsibility for the 1981 riots to police racism. However, this debate should be rapidly joined and superseded by careful analysis of causes and a shift to social policy.

But a key feature of the present situation is the way that the lack of any serious debate about a shift in social and economic policy has been accompanied by a prolongation of the repressive and punitive response. Police tracking and arresting of rioters has continued much longer after the riots than on previous occasions with far more arrests (at the time of writing around 3,000 with many still to come as the police pour over CCTV footage). Certainly, the surveillance technology - in particular CCTV - is immensely more sophisticated than in previous public disorders. But behind this lies a political motive to maintain the theme of 'mindless criminality' in the public consciousness and to prepare for a decade of worsening social deprivation by sending a clear message that urban disorder will be met with heavy policing and exemplary sentences by the courts. Meanwhile the attempt to incorporate welfare and housing agencies into the 'extended police family' with threats of benefit reduction and termination of housing tenancies against families with members convicted of rioting seems aimed at achieving what the military call 'full spectrum dominance'.

Neoliberalism, having renounced as irrational any attempt at social reform, falls back on repression, hoping that 'shock and awe' inflicted by a joined up security state will be sufficient to contain the anger and rage of a lost generation of young people through the coming years of the worst global economic recession since the 1930s.

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