

Is Paris burning or Watt?

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We must leave our dreams and abandon our old beliefs and friendships of the time before life began. Let us waste no time in sterile litanies and nauseating mimicry. Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. Look at them today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration. - Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

✘ Or Soweto, or Bolton, or Brixton, or Petrograd? In 1976, the young people of Soweto had finally had enough, people can only take so much before they revolt no matter what the cost.

And the experts in their droves, come out of the woodwork like cockroaches and produce their 'learned' analyses of what ails our broke down capitalisms, even, as the *Independent* the other day advanced the theory that the youths of France used their cellphones and the Internet to co-ordinate their uprising in order to explain the sheer scale of it (I kid you not), it seems a fundamental truth escapes them.[1]

Spontaneous uprisings are as old as class societies as any reading of history teaches us from Watt Tyler's Peasants' Revolt in the 13th century through to the dispossessed of the 'barrios' of Paris or Caracas.

What distinguishes the revolt currently taking place in France is not only the scale of it, sweeping across France from one ghetto to the next but that it reflects the fact that the legacy of colonialism and its benighted descendent, the 'neo-liberal' agenda of the IMF and the World Bank has finally come back to haunt the Western world.

The importation of cheap, colonial labour whether from Puerto Rico to New York in the 1940s, from the Caribbean to London in the 1950s or those from Bangla Desh and Pakistan in the 1960s, all reflect the stark reality of a divided world, that sooner or later, given the fundamentally racist nature of capitalist society was bound to blow up in our faces.

Some on the left even argue that a major cause of the current unrest is, as Frank Furedi argues one of "political exhaustion" of the ruling elites, that following the end of the Cold War

... the European political elites lack a project. They no longer have a mission to perform, and do not possess a distinct outlook that can inform their policies and day-to-day actions.[2]

Lack a project? Is it any wonder that we on the left face our own crisis when this kind of analysis is all we have to offer as an explanation for what is an on-going phenomenon, a phenomenon that Furedi acknowledges as his references to the riots of Oldham and elsewhere testifies, that of an global 'underclass', the descendents of a post-colonial policy that has come home to haunt us in the 'belly of the beast'.

What Furedi fails to mention is the role of racism as a fundamental aspect of capitalism. Indeed, Furedi's article fails to mention the 'r' word at all except in the final paragraph, where his own failure of imagination is summed up

... the Anglo-American media have been quick to preach to the French about the enlightened ways of doing race relations, and call on them to learn from America and Britain. Maybe this learning should be the other way around. The problems that afflict France are not the result of unimaginative Gallic policymaking. They are ultimately the product of a political exhaustion that is no less prevalent in Britain or Belgium than it is in France. The solution lies not in dreaming up clever ways of managing community conflict, but in demanding that societies stop evading the fundamental questions posed in our times: what is the purpose of politics; who are we as a society; and what defines our humanity?[3]

Ultimately, it is the failure to recognise that the fundamental contradictions of capitalism that has seen firstly, the importation of cheap labour to do the jobs considered too demeaning by the white working classes of the capitalist world to perform and secondly, the export of industrial capitalism to the un-unionised working people of our former colonies. Add to this the assault by the IMF and the World Bank on the poor of the planet which has displaced millions who have in turn 'invaded' the metropolitan centres of capital in search of a living.

Failure of the imagination? "Political exhaustion" on the part of the ruling elites? I despair if this is what passes for a 'left' analysis when we have for decades experienced the results of the imperial mindset that affects all sections of capitalist society. Until we face the reality that we are the privileged of the world, living on borrowed time and on stolen labour, there can be no solution.

'More Africans Enter U.S. Than in Days of Slavery', New York Times, February 21, 2005

Although Frantz Fanon focused on the effects of colonialism on the 'native', the following description could just as easily describe the *banlieues* of France as those of Algeria

The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rule of Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous. The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. - The Wretched of the Earth, p. 38

A suffocating myopia has descended on the West, one that ignores the reality of a world

that outside the metropolitan centres is based on sheer brute force of arms and repression whether in Colombia, Iraq, or Palestine, where the uniting factor is an imperialism increasingly desperate in its attempts not only to hold onto what it has stolen but to absorb the fact that the policies of centuries has finally come to a head.

That it explodes in the face of a smug and comfortable intelligentsia, whether of the 'left' or the right should come as no surprise to us, it is but our just desserts for the centuries of oppression we have inflicted on Fanon's Wretched of the Earth and for ignoring the reality of life in our own 'backyard', even as we speed off up the M-25 to some cathedral of consumption to get our fix of fixtures.

Wake up Frank Furedi and tell it like is, you have nothing to lose but your illusions.

Notes

[1] 'It is reasonable to presume rioters have been using their mobile phones and internet access to maximise the impact of their demonstrations.' The *Independent*, 7 November, 2005.

[2] 'French lessons for us all The riots reveal the political exhaustion of Europe' by Frank Furedi, 8 November 2005.

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