

Riots in Britain: Back to the Future

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Exactly thirty years ago Brixton exploded with rage against the de facto occupation of Brixton by the Met police. And, as I write this, all kinds of madness is going down in various parts of London and elsewhere.

The Scarman Report was one of the most influential reports in postwar Britain, yet despite criticism of the police they escaped blame for the events in Brixton. For years black youth had been subjected to intense racist policing. The riots erupted at the end of the first week of an operation called 'Swamp 81' in which the area had been flooded with more than 100 plainclothes cops. In two days they stopped more than 1,000 people and arrested over 100-twice the normal weekly average. As the Daily Mirror said, 'Nobody rules the streets of London, Brixton, or even Railton Road except the Metropolitan Police.' Riots started after extremely high levels of police harassment. — '[Can the police be reformed?](#)', Socialist Review, March 1999[1]

Predictably, the politicians and the police have been alleging that it was "criminal elements from the outside" or, "copycat criminal activity" that caused the 'looting' and 'burning' in Tottenham and elsewhere over this past weekend. How true this is or what relevance it has to this working class North London community is not explained. And what does 'outside' mean anyway?

"Was Saturday night an orgy of mindless violence or a cry of rage from a marginalised, disaffected part of society?" — '[Was Tottenham's riot a cry of rage?](#)' BBC News 7 August 2011

But we've been here before, many times. Back at the beginning of the 1980s when under the Thatcher government Brixton, Toxteth in Birmingham, Tottenham and other communities exploded with rage, against the 'sus laws'[2], used primarily against young black people and the deaths of black people at the hands of the police.

A "cry of rage from a marginalised, disaffected part of society"? Why are they 'marginalised'? Why are they disaffected?

"Police have condemned a wave of "copycat criminal activity" across London in a second night of looting and disorder following riots in Tottenham." — '[Copycat crime across London after Tottenham riot](#)', BBC News, 8 August 2011

Back in 2003 I wrote the following and as things have not basically changed, I see no reason why these words are not as relevant today as when I first wrote them:

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, attacks, especially on Black youth and Asians with the indifference and outright connivance of the police rose to unprecedented levels, with Black resistance stiffening throughout the 1970s, culminating in the 'riots' of the 1980-81. And just as now, Afro-Caribbean children suffered the institutional effects of an education policy that imprisoned them in ESN (Educationally Sub-Normal) schools.

"It was clear that the state's version of 'multi-culturalism' had failed because it was directed not at those sections of society that needed support, the Black and Asian community, but at the white power structure. [A]ll...it had done was create a "race relations industry".

"Multi-culturalism deflected the political concerns of the black community into the cultural concerns of different communities, the struggle against racism into the struggle for culture.

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"Underlying the whole of the state's project was a divisive culturalism that turned the living, dynamic, progressive aspects of black people's culture into artefact and habit and custom — and began to break up community." — 'Communities of Resistance - black struggles for socialism' by A. Sivanandan, Verso Books 1990

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[B]y 1981, under the impact of Thatcherism, the lid blew off and as Sivanandan so succinctly puts it,

"[T]he youth of the benighted inner cities, black and white, Afro-Caribbean and Asian, came together again, not so much in joint struggle as in a blinding moment of spontaneous insurrection against the impossibility of their common condition."

The state's reaction was dramatic. Commissions of Inquiry were set up including that of Lord Scarmon's into the Brixton 'disorders' and their causes. Labour's Urban Aid programme was exhumed and funding for black 'self-help' groups increased dramatically. These so-called ethnic projects were in reality, a continuation of those initiated under the Labour government and as Sivanandan puts it, "[T]he Tories were not averse to taking lessons from their masters in social control."

The core of the approach to the 'problem' of British-born blacks had its roots at Bristol University's Social Science Council on Ethnic Relations that identified the 'problem' as one of 'ethnic identity'. The youth, according to the report of the Home Affairs Committee on Racial Disadvantage were,

"caught between the cultural expectations of their parents (the first generation immigrants) and the social demands of the wider society.... West Indian boys have conflicted identifications with the general representatives of their own ethnicity and the native white population."

In other words, "Identity is all." And furthermore as part of the importation of

the US approach to the 'problem' of ethnic minorities, we read that it's not institutional racism that's the problem, but it's,

“because of the impact of British social conditions on the matriarchal extended family structure of the West Indian immigrants.”

Like I didn't grow up within an extended family structure along with millions of other working class kids of my generation? The report goes on to list all the 'problems' that the black community has including,

“Young West Indians...are 'a people of the street... They live their lives on the street, having nothing better to do: they make their protest there: and some of them live off street crime.' And this hostility of black youth...has...'infected older members of the community [where they have] time to engage in endless discussion of their grievances.”

The objective being to excuse the state of its institutional racism and instead blame the West Indian community of an “inherent disability”.

As Sivanandon puts it,

“Racism, for Scarmon, was in the mind — in the attitudes, prejudices, irrational beliefs — and these are to be found on both sides of the divide, black and white. Institutional racism was a matter of black perception, white racism was a matter of prejudice...and so [it shifted] the object of anti-racist struggle from the state to the individual, from changing society to changing people.”

Enter RAT ('Racism Awareness Training'), an entirely apposite acronym. RAT began its smelly life as HAT (Human Awareness Training) on a military base in Florida as a response to the black rebellions of the 1960s. RAT grew out of the Kerner Commission (1968) that declared that racism was a white problem, and that it was “white institutions that created it, white institutions maintain it and white society condones it.”

An entire, new industry devoted to 'racism awareness' was created with a plethora of literature, organisations and businesses to bring about “changing the behaviour of whites” through to “increasing the capabilities of non-white groups. But the principle responsibility was 'with the white community rather than within the non-white communities.’”

An entire, new range of 'pathologies' emerged as a result including racism defined as “prejudice plus institutional power” and finally “cultural racism”. The 'bible' of the RAT syndrome was an education thesis of Judy Katz who defined the problem as “Systematic handbook of exercises for the re-education of white people with respect to attitudes and behaviorisms.” In other words, racism was a “psychological problem”.

Widely used in the US in the education system, RAT finally made its way to the UK in a modified form. Under the impact of the RAT syndrome, the entire focus of the state's 'fight' against racism shifted to the psychological domain. So for example, Home Affairs now described racial disadvantage (the UK term for

affirmative action) as “it cannot be unfair to give help to those with a special handicap.”

To sum up RAT, Sivanandon describes their psychobabble as follows;

“[Racism] is a combination of mental illness, original sin and biological determinism.... Racism, according to RAT, has its roots in white culture, and white culture, unaffected by material conditions or history, goes back to the beginning of time.”

By on the one hand divorcing racism from class and on the other by personalising the effects of racism, the state absolved itself of responsibility. It also sidestepped the connection between racism and fascism for failing to recognise the link. But Martin Webster of the National Front knew when he said “the social base of the NF is made up of the desperate and dispossessed among the white working class.” — [‘An institutional state of denial’](#) By William Bowles, 27 October 2003

The lessons not learned

Clearly nothing at all has changed in the intervening thirty years. The economic deprivations of the 1970-80s has returned with a vengeance and along with it the rise of neo-fascism and the inevitable reactions of those most heavily impacted by the cuts, especially young working class, both black and white. Tottenham which falls under the control of Haringey Council has seen its youth services budget cut by more than 75%. There are more than 50 people for each unfilled job in the borough, 10% more people claiming unemployment benefit this year than last and ten of the eighteen youth clubs in the borough have been closed.

The BBC however, has this to say:

“But if it were poverty alone were the driving factor, one would expect communities in the cities of the north of Britain, not the south, to have been in flames on Saturday night.” — ‘Was Tottenham’s riot a cry of rage?’

As if to answer the BBC’s question, riots broke out in my neighbourhood, Brixton as well as in Enfield, Hackney and other communities but no doubt the BBC puts them down to ‘copycat riots’? More sinister is the allegation that these are [‘Twitter coordinated Riots’](#).

For the BBC the only measure of frustration and rage are the unemployment figures but the BBC ignores the impact of policing on working class communities. After all it was the shooting death by the police—allegedly with a machine gun at point-blank range—of Tottenham resident Mark Duggan last Thursday that triggered the initial reaction, followed by the police allegedly batoning a 16-year old girl on Saturday at a protest rally organized by Duggan’s family over the way his death had been handled by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, tasked with investigating Duggan’s death.[3]

The subtle propaganda interplay between the BBC and the police is revealed by how the BBC report, ‘Was Tottenham’s riot a cry of rage?’ shifts the emphasis from the real conditions of working people to “low morale” in a police force that has seen its funding cut by 20%. This is how the BBC report put it:

“Morale among the police officers dealing with this incident [in Tottenham], and within the police service as a whole, is at its lowest level ever due to the constant attacks on them by the home secretary and the government in the form of the Winsor and Hutton reviews into police pay and conditions.”

The inference being I assume that “low morale” and cuts in police funding led to a riot in Tottenham? Clearly the political class fear increasing and spreading ‘social unrest’, especially amongst the BBC’s ‘marginalised, disaffected part of society’, who clearly feel that they have nothing to lose. This is what a resident of Tottenham had to say on the subject:

Having grown up in Tottenham, I’m deeply saddened that it has taken a riot to highlight the complex problems that blight the area. Yesterday on BBC News’s rolling coverage, a local shopkeeper described the scenes as “US-style inequality”. This is an inequality that has persisted ever since I took up residence in Tottenham aged seven, and the kind of inequality that went largely ignored. Tensions between the people and the police have always been known. Yesterday youth worker Symeon Brown perfectly articulated this tension, stating on BBC News that “there is a sense that the police are not for us”. It has taken a riot to put Tottenham’s problems on the national agenda. — [‘Twitter didn’t fuel the Tottenham riot’](#), Reni Eddo-Lodge, the Guardian 8 August 2011

Notes

1. See the [Scarmon Report](#), an investigation into how the death of Stephen Lawrence was handled by the police that concluded that the “Metropolitan police was institutionally racist”. Nothing has changed. In fact a high-up police officer stated on BBC radio some years back that it was impossible to root out institutional racism in the police, that’s how deep it goes in British society.
2. “Stopping and searching suspects [sus] will become easier for police, the Government promised yesterday. But Home Office changes fall well short of Tory plans to slash red tape. The Government has been panicked into action by David Cameron, who said outdated search laws designed to protect ethnic minorities and the young from harassment must go. — [‘Return of ‘sus’ laws as police are given powers to stop and search without giving reason’](#), Daily Mail, 31 January 2008
3. An eyewitness says the girl’s beating was in response to a champagne glass she was holding that she threw at the police.

“After she was hit with police batons, rioters threw missiles back at the police officers, according to other accounts from onlookers.” — [‘London riots: 16-year-old girl and police clash - video’](#).

Elsewhere, the Daily Telegraph tells us that,

“The 16 year-old was said by some witnesses to have thrown a stone at a line of officers during the initial protest at Tottenham police station.

“She was then allegedly knocked to the ground, and as the crowds retaliated it

led to two squad cars being set alight at the start of a night of violent disturbances and looting.” — [“Attack’ on teenage girl blamed for start of Tottenham riot’](#).

1. [The BNP and bridging the gulf of disbelief By William Bowles](#)
2. [Major police clampdown as riots spread across London and other UK cities By Julie Hyland](#)
3. [Barack Obama, front man for the ‘man’ By William Bowles](#)
4. [William Bowles: Obama and the Left’s Dilemma](#)
5. [Methinks they do protest too much By William Bowles](#)
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