# Policing the riots: from Bristol and Brixton to Tottenham, via Toxteth, Handsworth, etc

## Tony Jefferson tells the angry, ongoing story of rioting over the past 30 years

The most surprising thing about this summer's riots was the surprise that greeted them; as if we had not seen their like before. If not actually hypocritical, such surprise is disingenuous. Once poor people have exhausted what few legitimate resources they have, if feelings of anger and frustration have not been mollified by those in authority, under certain conditions a riot, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, 'an outbreak of active lawlessness or disorder among the populace', can ensue. Since such outbreaks, historically, have been largely confined to the poor and dispossessed, it would seem to be definitional of such outbreaks that they are also expressive acts, impotent howls of rage by those with little (and little to lose), which, for a while, empower the powerless by subverting the dominant order, if only by wanton acts of destruction and looting. This seems to describe the beginnings of this summer's riots. The spark that ignited the original disturbance in Tottenham, the death of a black person at the hands of the police in a poor, deprived neighbourhood with long-standing antagonistic relations between police and young people, uncannily echoes the starting point of many of the major urban disturbances of the past 30 years.

### Police flooding

After the first Brixton riots of 1981, the subsequent report by Lord Scarman (1981) concluded that these were 'essentially an outburst of anger and resentment by young black people against the police'.

That anger had a history. During the 1970s, poor, young black youths in deprived inner city locations began to be seen as troublesome and potentially criminal. A concern about street robberies in the early part of the decade came to be seen in a 'new light', and a moral panic about 'muggings' was born (Hall, et al., 1978). Increasingly seen as a black crime, aggressive policing using ancient stop and search powers and the old 'sus' laws (which allowed police to arrest and secure convictions purely on suspicion of an impending illegality), were used disproportionately against young black males (often involving the police flooding an area). This concern about black crime was used also to justify a heavy, intimidating police presence at the revived Notting Hill Carnival. The reappearance of the National Front (NF) during this period, marching and meeting in immigrant areas, produced further clashes with the police, as they protected the hated NF from the Anti-Nazi League and local, black residents. It was the NF meeting in Southall Town Hall in 1979, and the aggressive policing of the protestors that led to the death of Blair Peach, killed by a police officer, that ensured Asians too became part of this story.

The immediate trigger for the 1981 Brixton riots was 'Operation Swamp': a 10 day operation in which 150 plain clothes officers made 1000 stops and 150 arrests (Jefferson and Grimshaw, 1984). Two nights of rioting followed. Animosity towards the police was not confined to London. A year earlier, a poor deprived neighbourhood of Bristol, St Paul's, witnessed a long day of riots after a police raid on a well-known community café. The nine days of rioting in Toxteth, Liverpool, during summer 1981, were also sparked by insensitive policing of the Black community, namely, the arrest of Leroy Cooper. During the riots, 'police were attacked by youths with petrol bombs and paving stones' and 'CS gas was used for the first time on the UK mainland, a man died, knocked down by a police vehicle, 500 people were arrested [and] 468 police were hurt' (Kennedy, 2011).

Deteriorating police-black relations were underpinned by the worsening socio-economic and political situation of especially Black youth (a fact recognised by Scarman). During the 1970s, structural changes to the global economy were beginning to manifest in growing unemployment, and a series of industrial disputes. The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, with her authoritarian, cost-cutting, neo-liberal agenda, worsened things considerably: the 1980s produced some of the fiercest industrial disputes in living memory,

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wholesale de-industrialisation and mass unemployment, especially among the young. Black youth, also having to cope with a growing racism and discrimination, were especially badly hit.

### 'Symbolic locations'

The response of the Metropolitan Police to Scarman was to release figures to show black people were disproportionately responsible for muggings in London. Sir Kenneth Newman, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, also introduced the idea of targeting 'symbolic locations'

– places where unemployed (often black) youth, congregate. Although he suggested that this was an 'underclass' problem (a prescient remark in the context of the spread of rioting, in the 1990s, to poor white areas), the symbolic locations were all areas of black settlement, one of which, Tottenham's Broadwater Farm, exploded in 1985, after the rough handling of a black woman, Cynthia Jarrett, in a drug raid left her dead from a heart attack. PC Keith Blakelock who became isolated in the mayhem was hacked to death. The 1985 Brixton riots started similarly, with the mistaken shooting of another black woman, Cherry Groce, in a drugs raid. In Handsworth, Birmingham, in the same year, two days of rioting followed yet another ill judged police arrest, and two Asian brothers died in the fire that engulfed their post office.

## Changing perception

Although the ancient 'sus' laws were scrapped after a successful political campaign, the *Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984* gave police new stop and search powers, on 'reasonable grounds'. If stop and search powers were central to Black communities feeling over-policed, they also felt under-protected as escalating racial attacks tended to get dismissed by police as not real police work, as 'rubbish' work. When Asians took to defending themselves, this led to some highly politicised trials (e.g. Newham 7 and Newham 8) that contributed to a changing perception among police of Asian youth – more political, more troublesome. In 1989, a new *Prevention of Terrorism Act* with stop and search powers was introduced specifically to combat Irish terrorism. It could be used to search anyone, without suspicion. Increasingly, it was used to stop and search black and Asian youth (These powers became section 44 powers under the *Terrorism Act 2000*).

Thatcherism outlasted Thatcher, as did the riots. The savage cuts and industrial battles of the Thatcher years had left many more than black youth angry and resentful 'against the police'. The more overtly political

poll tax riots aside, the new riots of 1991 in Cardiff, Oxford and Tyneside were, in their locally specific ways (Campbell, 1993), anti-police riots expressing exclusion and some racism (in the pattern of shops and buildings targeted). Provocative police behaviour led to the spread of rioting to the Asian areas of Manningham, Bradford, in 1995.

The police continued to connect black youth and crime. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Paul Condon, publicly stated in 1994 that the majority of muggers in London were black. That same year, police were given more, less restrictive stop and search powers. Section 60 of the new *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994* allowed them, under certain circumstances, to stop and search at random. Predictably, use of these powers nearly tripled between 1998-1999 and 2001-2002, with black people and Asians massively over-represented in the figures. The 'under-policing' of racist attacks, vividly demonstrated in the indifferent police handling of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, was borne out by the resulting official enquiry that found the police guilty of institutional racism (Macpherson, 1999).

## Retaliatory attacks

Summer 2001, like the summers of 1981 and 1991, saw a spate of disturbances, this time in the former northern mill towns of Burnley, Bradford and Oldham. These started after white people attacked Asian homes. Provocative NF marches in the area led to retaliatory Asian attacks on whites. These 'race riots' led to renewed anxieties about Asian criminality.

In the light of the above brief catalogue of recent riots, situated in relation to the angry, ongoing story of police-black relations, racism, the criminalisation of black youth, growing poverty and deprivation, chronic youth unemployment, and the spread of many of these issues to embrace poor whites and sections of Asian youth, there is a depressing inevitability about the latest angry outbursts. None of the policing issues identified by Scarman have been

adequately dealt with; rather, the police have been given more of the hated powers to stop and search, and the underlying political and socio-economic conditions of marginalised Black, White and Asian youth have worsened. As Gary Younge concisely and movingly put it, speaking of the latest riots, 'In the absence of any community leadership, viable social movements or memory of collective struggle, the most these political orphans could hope to achieve was private acquisition and social chaos' (Younge, 2011). The numbers of these 'political orphans' is growing: 'the dead end of globalisation looms clearly before Europe and America's youth: little chance of stable employment, or even affordable education' (Mishra, 2011). If we continue to ignore the plight of our youth, and fail to provide scope for them to live useful, meaningful lives, we have no right to be surprised when they wreak their revenge with 'meaningless' destruction and looting. ■

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