

Understanding the riots

John Lea and Simon Hallsworth
put the riots into political
and historic perspective

To make sense of last summer's riots it is important to put them in historical perspective. A comparison with the 1981 riots in Brixton, Liverpool and elsewhere and with the 2001 riots in Bradford and nearby towns reveals two shifts. The concerns of the rioters have shifted from a clear response to manifest injustice – usually at the hands of the police – to a more diffuse expression of generalised rage. Meanwhile the response has shifted from attempts – symbolised by Lord Scarman's report on the Brixton riots of 1981 – to reintegrate the rioters and their communities into what remained of welfare citizenship to a reinforced criminalisation of a dysfunctional population. The backdrop is of course the demise of the Keynesian Welfare State and the harsh realities of neoliberalism.

Scarman, already too late...

For three days in April 1981 young black men battled the police on the streets of Brixton. These youngsters were faced with the toxic combination of unemployment, racism, a society which marginalised their political voice and which addressed the symptoms of urban decay with systematic over-policing. The breaking point was exasperation at oppressive use of stop and search, in particular the massive 'Operation Swamp 81'.

Lord Scarman, commissioned by Home Secretary Willie Whitelaw, started from the perspective that policies aimed at integration of the Black community had failed. He understood that the rioters had a particular grievance regarding police behaviour. He recommended the recording of police stops

(subsequently part of the *1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act*) and mechanisms of police-community liaison to give the Black community some sort of local voice in policing policy. More generally, he saw the Brixton community as containing a 'a wealth of voluntary effort and goodwill' (Scarman, 1981) and argued the state must recognise the 'long term need to provide useful, gainful employment and suitable educational, recreational and leisure opportunities for young people, especially in the inner city' (ibid).

Scarman was in effect calling for Keynesian state-led investment in the riot-torn inner cities. But he was already out on a limb. The first Thatcher government had been elected in 1979 and was determined to reduce public spending despite high levels of unemployment. The model for the future was rather 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 while poor riot-torn areas like Toxteth were largely ignored. Deindustrialisation and private-led urban regeneration were already laying the foundations for the next wave of riots.

Bradford and community cohesion

The Bradford, Oldham and Burnley riots of 2001 were the fruit. Stretching from May to July they involved sporadic three-way street battles between White and Asian youth and the police. The poor were now fighting each other in communities abandoned by both private capital and the state. The collapse of the Yorkshire textile and steel economies as investment went elsewhere left young Asians facing 40 per cent unemployment and competing with Whites for an ever diminishing local supply of jobs and resources. This was becoming fertile recruiting ground for the far-right on one hand and Islamic extremism on the other. Meanwhile the police were frequently notable by their absence as if these poor communities were simply not worth bothering with.

Each town got a separate report and a ministerial overview chaired by John Denham. The message was by now firmly neoliberal. Scarman's 'how did we fail to integrate these communities?' was replaced by 'how

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did these communities fail to succeed in local labour markets?'. Whites and Asians needed to develop 'community cohesion', 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, rather a battery of community renewal and cohesion initiatives came forth.

Some good work was done but the fatal flaw in the entire strategy was that private investors were interested in consumer-driven city centre regeneration ring-fenced by

CCTV, anti-social behaviour orders and dispersal zones, aimed at excluding the very unemployed youth who needed integrating (Coleman, 2004). Neoliberal economic 'renewal' thus magnified social inequalities and drove further cohorts of young people and their communities – cohesive or otherwise – into the low wage insecure jobs and unemployment. Then came the financial tsunami of 2008 and the cuts.

August 2011: zero-degree protest

Last August's riots were something new. They included, but spread beyond, areas that had previously experienced riots. Many familiar elements were present – though mercifully not inter-ethnic conflict – yet the order of importance seemed different. The police shooting of Mark Duggan and failure to subsequently communicate with the community was familiar enough. But, as the riots spread, youths battled police often because the latter simply got in the way of occupying the streets and 'taking stuff'. In four days of rioting – during which police appeared frequently overwhelmed – scores of shops, often high status consumer outlets, were looted, some burnt to the ground. Looting, and creating havoc on the streets, rather than a side-effect of the chaos as in previous riots, was the main activity. 'We rioted to show the police we could' was a frequent refrain. Slavoj Žižek (2011) characterised the riots as 'zero-degree protest, a violent action demanding nothing.' If previous riots had a specific target or grievance – stop and search, competition for jobs, last summer's riots were the diffuse and generalised rage of a dispossessed population angry at a system that has failed them but with no vision of an alternative. That is why they are more serious than any that have gone before.

Evidence – mainly from police and court data on those arrested – shows the rioters were overwhelmingly young, poor, unemployed, educationally deprived, multi-ethnic and involved in petty crime. But, and this must be worrying to the authorities, 17 per

cent (28 per cent in London) of those arrested were students (Home Office, 2011). The nightmare scenario is a link-up between unemployed youth and the global wave of student-led protests against financial greed and privatisation of education.

But the government is able, or willing, to do remarkably little. Inquiry into the riots has been kept at arm's length from government. In place of a Scarman or even a Cattle we get fragmentation: the head of Jobcentre Plus running a low key investigation while some local authorities are conducting their own inquiries. The task of systematic investigation has been left to others and thankfully taken up by a consortium led by *The Guardian*.

If the 1981 riots highlighted the crisis of the welfare state, last August's riots highlighted the crisis of its neoliberal successor. Global financial meltdown has led – wrongly Keynesians argue – to massive cuts in public spending, to which a public inquiry of Scarman stature might recommend a halt or even reversal. Cameron's 'Big Society', however, aims to replace much social spending with private and voluntary sector initiatives and hence there has been a concentration on the sorts of issues such agencies could possibly handle: such as individual problem families or gang membership. The problems with this approach are obvious: nationally only 13 per cent (19 per cent in London) of riot arrestees were plausibly gang related (Home Office, 2011). A focus on gangs steers attention away from poverty and rising youth unemployment towards pathological subcultures (Hallsworth and Brotherton, 2011).

The lack of anything resembling a 'national conversation' about poverty, marginality and the desperate need to create a future for an expanding population of unemployed young people has left the ground clear for a continued emphasis on policing and repression. This is understandable as an immediate response to the mayhem of a riot but it has been prolonged and strengthened such that it now constitutes the main response. Police tracking and arresting rioters has

continued much longer after the event than in previous riots and there have been far more arrests (at the time of writing around 3,000 with many still to come as the police pore over CCTV footage). This is due, not just to the surveillance technology now available but to a political determination to maintain the narrative of 'mindless criminality' as the main issue 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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