

# **London burns — causes & consequences of the riots**

*An anarchist perspective*

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# Contents

<b>What happened?</b> . . . . .	3
<b>The killing of Mark Duggan</b> . . . . .	3
<b>Demanding answers and the start of the riot</b> . . . . .	4
<b>The spread of the rioting</b> . . . . .	4
<b>Choosing sides?</b> . . . . .	5
<b>Brief history of police killings</b> . . . . .	6
<b>Economic conditions in Tottenham</b> . . . . .	7
<b>The crisis &amp; the cuts</b> . . . . .	7
<b>The politics of riots</b> . . . . .	8
<b>Will no one think of the Olympics?</b> . . . . .	9
<b>Class and race</b> . . . . .	9
<b>How do racism &amp; poverty intersect</b> . . . . .	10
<b>Who actually rioted?</b> . . . . .	11
<b>Inter community tensions, shop keepers, class &amp; defence squads</b> . . . . .	11
<b>Far-right fantasy</b> . . . . .	13
<b>The downside of Spontaneity</b> . . . . .	13
<b>The politics of fear</b> . . . . .	14
<b>Consequences of ‘scum’</b> . . . . .	15
<b>Riots are often contradictory</b> . . . . .	16
<b>What will change?</b> . . . . .	17

The police killing of Mark Duggan resulted in four nights of rioting across England. The immediate trigger was the killing itself, and the disrespect shown by the police to Mark's family and friends. But the riots rapidly broadened to expressions of a more general anger and alienation; an anger that was all too often unfocused and striking out at the nearest target of opportunity. This resulted in widespread destruction of resources in already deprived neighborhoods and some anti-social attacks on bystanders. Despite this, the roots of the riots lie in the economic and political conditions of these districts, and not in 'poor parenting' or 'mindless criminality'. These conditions were created by the very politicians and business elite who now call for a return to normality and repression.

The riots happened at a particular moment, a moment when capitalism is in deep crisis. Indeed the riots occurred at the same time as yet another crash in global markets. The two competed with each other to be the lead story on the news. This is not a coincidence; the crash, and the cuts unleashed to impose its costs on ordinary people, mean not only rocketing unemployment but also the slashing of public services. And while the focus is on the estimated £200 million of destruction caused by the rioting, this pales into insignificance in comparison with the huge destruction of wealth taking place on the stock exchanges. Likewise, while the media focus has been on the hundreds of workers and small business owners who will face unemployment because of the destruction of their workplaces, the system that bred the riot has refused work to millions – around one million people between the ages of 16 and 24 are unemployed in the UK today.

Now, in the aftermath, it has become clear that those who made the mistake of taking what they had been told to desire are to be brutality punished, to set an example to others that the laws of property are to be respected at all costs – after all, if we could all take what we needed where would be the room for capitalism? There is no other explanation for the sentences handed down, which have included six months for taking bottled water worth £3.50!

And, of course, the bankers that triggered far more destruction and unemployment have been rewarded rather than facing similar punishment. Russell Brand asks, in a blog post on the riots, *"How should we describe the actions of the city bankers that brought our economy to its knees in 2010? Altruistic? Mindful? Kind? But then again, they do wear suits, so they deserve to be bailed out, perhaps that's why not one of them has been imprisoned. And they got away with a lot more than a few fucking pairs of trainers."*

## **What happened?**

In war, they say the first casualty is the truth. After four days of sustained mass rioting which has spread from North London, it is important to go back and see what we know so far. The mass scale of the disturbances is illustrated by the fact that police claim to have arrested over 1500 people, a figure that can only be a small fraction of those who took part in rioting.

## **The killing of Mark Duggan**

The immediate cause of the riots was the killing of Mark Duggan by armed police on Thursday August 4<sup>th</sup>, as he was travelling home in a minicab. The police initially tried to spin the story that they had killed Mark during a shoot-out but it has since emerged that the bullet that hit

a police officer's radio was in fact fired by the officer who shot Duggan dead, and that there is no evidence that Mark Duggan opened fire at police officers. Over a week after the shooting the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) finally admitted to the Guardian that *"It seems possible that we may have verbally led journalists to believe that shots were exchanged."*

The 29-year-old black man, father of three children, was in a mini-cab on the way home when the attempted arrest took place. There were two shots fired by the firearms officer from the Met's armed CO19 squad – one of which killed Duggan when it entered his head. The other bullet lodged in the radio of a fellow officer. At the scene, the police recovered a weapon which they claim was Mark Duggan's. They claim that it was a starter pistol which was converted to carry live ammunition.

The police are eager to justify the killing by describing Duggan as a gangster. However, his fiancée Semone Wilson told Channel 4 News that, while in the past he had been on remand, they were planning to move out of Tottenham to *"start a new life together"* with their children. She also said that *"If he did have a gun – which I don't know – Mark would run. Mark is a runner. He would run rather than firing and that's coming from the bottom of my heart."*

## **Demanding answers and the start of the riot**

Semone Wilson and other family members went to Tottenham police station at 17.00 on Saturday August 8<sup>th</sup>, along with local community leaders, to seek answers to questions about the killing. The police failed to provide a senior officer to answer their questions and, some three and a half hours later, rioting started as the protest dispersed, apparently after riot police had beaten a 16-year-old woman in front of the crowd.

In the riots that followed that night, two police cars and a bus were set on fire and several shops were attacked. The rioting spread from Tottenham to Enfield and Brixton. Police reported they had arrested 55 people and claimed 26 officers were injured. At this point the Duggan family distanced themselves from the rioting.

## **The spread of the rioting**

Rioting spread all across England over the following three nights, with significant disturbances being reported in Birmingham, Salford, Liverpool, Nottingham, Leicester, Manchester, Wolverhampton, West Bromwich, Gloucester, Chatham, Oxford, and Bristol. The police were quickly overwhelmed, and were lucky that for the most part the riots focused on looting and avoiding the police rather than direct confrontation and attacks on the police. This was not true everywhere. In Nottingham no less than five police stations were attacked at various points, but in most places the rioters dispersed when sizeable numbers of police appeared, to melt away and resume looting elsewhere.

The form of most of the riots made it very hard for the police to contain them. In a traditional riot that is directed at the police, the riot typically sees large massed lines of static, heavily protected riot police in solid ranks facing off against the rioters who rain down projectiles from a distance. Both sides may advance, retreat and attempt to outflank each other, but this pattern means that the destruction and looting is relatively contained. But most of the riots that broke

out after the first night were focused on looting and avoiding the police, rather than directly confronting them.

The President of the Association of Chief Police Officers, Hugh Orde, wrote an opinion piece for the Guardian in the middle of the riots arguing against the use of water cannon and plastic bullets. This wasn't on moral grounds, as he ordered their use many times when he was the head of the PSNI in Northern Ireland. He clearly thought that British citizens in London should not receive the same treatment he had meted out to British citizens in Ireland, but, that aside, his main argument was tactical. He wrote *"The use of water cannon, while logistically difficult, works against large stationary crowds throwing missiles at police [...] It achieves distance between police and unlawful crowds that is often vital. Utilising baton rounds, an even more severe tactic, is fundamentally to protect life. [...] What we have seen so far from these riots, involving fast-moving and small groups of lawless people, is a situation that merits the opposite end of public-order policing."*

In its coverage, The Economist confirmed why this meant the police seemed to have lost control: *"The police's old tactical manual is based on two principles that were suddenly irrelevant. The first is the assumption that rioters want to attack the police themselves. It makes things a lot easier if you know that they will be where you are. The second is that the main objective is to control ground rather than people. But now, Mr Innes points out, the police have to find "flash mobs" who use social media to gather and grab loot in one place, disperse, then meet somewhere else: "You have to follow them, harry them and channel them away."*

The problem with that approach is that when looters are chased, they split up and police resources are dissipated. Even if officers catch and arrest one (tying up at least two policemen who may be needed elsewhere), they might only be able to charge him (or her) with a minor disorder offence.

The form the rioting took is also shown in the ratio of arrests to reported police injuries. Apart from the first night in Tottenham, when the police were the focus of anger, the number of police injuries reported is a fraction of those that have resulted from incidents where the riot was either based around confronting the police or getting through police lines. The 1981 riots in Brixton, for instance saw 299 police injured for only 82 arrests, according to official police figures. Of course, from the perspective of the police and the British elite, it was extremely useful that the riot took the form of looting which was, for the most part, contained in the impoverished areas of the cities, which meant that no significant elements of capital or the state were badly damaged.

## Choosing sides?

In *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell provided a useful general starting point for how anarchists view riots, writing *"I have no particular love for the idealised "worker" as he appears in the bourgeois Communist's mind, but when I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask myself which side I am on."* What happened in London and spread elsewhere was not some idealised glorious proletarian uprising, but the very real explosion of anger that occurs when years of poverty, police repression, and racism finally reach bursting point.

Some terrible things have happened during the riots, but the politicians who weep crocodile tears for the burning of shops and the anti-social muggings and beatings are the very same people

who bombed Iraq back into the stone age, and organised the war and occupation that killed hundreds of thousands. It is not necessary to see the rioters as some example of idealised workers revolting in order to see the hypocrisy and lies of the politicians and media organisations who rushed to portray the events as unusually horrific, rather than a consequence of a deeply divided society. This is not to suggest that the ‘answer’ to the riots is more pool tables in community halls to keep the youth off the street. That sort of sticking-plaster solution may well be applied in the aftermath to address the symptoms, but the cause is the deep inequality that is part and parcel of capitalism. This divide has terrible effects on the individuals who are trapped at the bottom of the wealth pyramid, often in conditions of inter-generational poverty, unemployment, and exclusion.

## **Brief history of police killings**

The motivations for the rioting after the first night cannot be reduced to the single factor of the killing of Mark Duggan. Rather, it was the spark that lit the touch paper of a firework that was ready to go up.

Mark Duggan’s killing is only the latest in a long history of deaths at the hands of the police. Since 1990, 900 deaths have occurred in police custody, and a quarter of these deaths occurred in the custody of the Metropolitan Police. 333 of these deaths have occurred since 1998, 87 of which followed the person being ‘restrained’ by the police involved. Not one of these deaths have resulted with a successful prosecution against the police officers involved; in fact, no police officer has been found guilty as a result of a death in custody in the past forty years.

In 1979, Blair Peach died from injuries he sustained while on an anti-racist demonstration in London. Fourteen witnesses saw Blair being struck by officers from the Special Patrol Group of the Metropolitan Police Force, yet no one was charged and an inquest upheld a verdict of ‘death by misadventure.’ In 1989 the Met reached an out-of-court settlement with Blair Peach’s brother. The 1985 Broadwater Farm Riots were sparked by a similar incident; a 49-year-old mother, Cynthia Jarrett, collapsed and died during a police search of her home.

In 2005, an innocent man from Brazil, Jean Charles De Menezes, was shot seven times in the head as he boarded a tube in Stockwell Underground station by the Metropolitan Police. More recently, thousands marched in south London earlier this year in protest over the death of reggae artist Smiley Culture, who police claimed stabbed himself while they were in his home.

Those who die in police stations are mostly from the poorest sections of the working class. In Britain in general, and London in particular, ethnic minorities are massively over-represented in the poorest 10% of the population, and this and straightforward racism mean that ethnic minorities are, again, over-represented among those who die in custody. Since 1998, of the 333 who died in custody they “*were mostly white (75%), male (90%) and aged between 25 and 44.*” But as 91% of the British population are classified as white in the census, this means that the remaining 9% of the population account for 25% of all deaths in custody.

The police in Britain are no different than police elsewhere in this regard. In Ireland questions remain to be answered about the deaths in custody of Terence Wheelock, John Maloney, and Brian Rossiter, among others. Were it not for the riots that resulted from the killing of Mark Duggan, his shooting would likely never have been more than a minor item on the news.

## Economic conditions in Tottenham

Tottenham is in the borough of Haringey where the riot began. Unemployment is at 8.8% — double the national average — and it's estimated that there is only one job for every 54 job seekers. Of the 354 boroughs in England, Tottenham is the eighteenth 'most deprived', and according to End Child Poverty, nearly 8000 children live in temporary accommodation. Haringey has the fourth highest rate of child poverty in London, with a staggering 61% of children living in low-income families.

The cut to the Education Maintenance Allowance grant — which is seen as a way to encourage disadvantaged youth to stay in education — coupled with the rise in university fees, has fallen hard on urban youth, who are seeing all options disappear. Symeon Brown, a 22 year old campaigner against the cuts in Haringey, said "How do you create a ghetto? By taking away the very services that people depend upon to live, to better themselves."

Several youth clubs were recently forced to close in Tottenham ,after a 75% cut was leveled at youth services in the area, and the council overall received £41 million less in their normal allocation from central government. At the end of July, the Guardian carried a video story on the closures, in which youth who had used the centres predicted a riot.

## The crisis & the cuts

The context of the riots is not simply the ongoing local poverty of Tottenham and other working class areas of inner London, but also the worsening situation the working class is facing due to the capitalist crisis. Even before the crisis, neo-liberalism meant that in Britain, as elsewhere, the gap between the rich and the poor was widening. The top 1% in Britain have a minimum estimated wealth of £2.6 million; the poorest 10% have less than £8,800 even when you include cars. This makes that poorest member of the 1% almost 300 times wealthier than the richest member of the 10%. These figures were revealed in a government report titled 'An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK' in January 2010.

As might be expected, race once more intersects with class in terms of poverty. *"Compared with a white British Christian man with similar qualifications, age and occupation, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim men and Black African Christian men have an income that is 13–21% lower. Nearly half of Bangladeshi and Pakistani households are in poverty."*

The UK bankers pulled in bonuses of nearly £14 billion this year, and David Cameron did not issue a squeal. Instead, he was focusing his attention on squeezing public sector workers for more tax and slashing social services. David Cameron is not going to go after his old school chums from Eton for their bonuses when he can focus on more cuts to public services. Part of the explanation for the depth, spread, and anger of the riots is found in the effects these cuts are having on those who were already at the very bottom of the wealth pyramid.

In an opinion piece for the London Independent, Boff Whalley of Chumbawamba quotes "Andrew Maxwell, an Irish comedian, ... *"Create a society that values material things above all else. Strip it of industry. Raise taxes for the poor and reduce them for the rich and for corporations. Prop up failed financial institutions with public money. Ask for more tax, while vastly reducing public services. Put adverts everywhere, regardless of people's ability to afford the things they advertise.*

*Allow the cost of food and housing to eclipse people's ability to pay for them. Light blue touch paper."*

The right and the bulk of the media want to deny any connection between poverty and the rioting but as the map makes clear the reality is that the riots almost all occurred in and around the districts where the poorest sections of the working class live.

## **The politics of riots**

People are not stupid. They can see the injustice of the situation in which they live. They are unheard. When this feeling of being ignored and exploited pervades a society, it does not take much to light the blue touch paper of the firework. But without political organisation, or at the very least widespread politicisation, the way this anger is expressed can be quite crude and untargeted. This is not to say the riots were apolitical, as clearly they were driven by economics and politics. The Daily Mail quoted *"a girl who claimed she left school at 13 who said: 'All these rich businesses for rich people are getting a bit of payback and it's about time the ordinary poor person had a say in this country.'"*

The Montreal Gazette carried interesting interviews with rioters in an unnamed estate in Hackney who argued for the riot in directly political terms. One was quoted as saying *"They were not your typical hoodlums out there. There were working people, angry people. They've raised rates, cut child benefit. Everyone just used it as a chance to vent."* A second rioter, a 39 year old mother, is described as saying *"She and others had little sympathy for many of the store owners whose premises had been looted and burned, identifying most as big chain stores that offer little to their community. Many of the more upmarket stores cater for growing numbers of middle-class professionals and white hipsters who have moved in recent years into Hackney's handsome townhouses, of which many sit yards away from poor housing estates."*

The politicians are keen to deny any political aspect of the riot, and indeed are trying to intimidate anyone who points out the obvious by accusing them of supporting arson and muggings. In this respect, this riot is quite different to the student riots of last winter and the anti-cuts riot in March. Then, the politicians were keen to suggest all the trouble was down to anarchists and other 'outside agitators'. This time they are keen to prevent any discussion of the reasons why there were four nights of severe rioting.

That said in many districts, the often random nature of what was attacked demonstrated a lack of collective politics beyond the desire to lash. It was not that people were disorganised. The riots did see considerable organising to loot those goods the rioters had been told to desire but often can't afford, but otherwise there was a tendency to lash out at the very limited authority figures that are within easy reach. There are obvious parallels with the French banlieue riots of late 2005, when local schools and community centres were destroyed for similar reasons.

But, as we have seen, at least some had a clear political understanding of what they were up against, and there were also attacks on police vehicles and even police stations, the latter requiring collective organisation and co-ordination. Five police stations were attacked in Nottingham, with police vehicles being destroyed in Nottingham, Bristol, and Tottenham itself.



## Will no one think of the Olympics?

Some of the media coverage has been of the ‘Oh no, what about the Olympics?’ variety. What indeed? The riots have been taking place close to the Olympic venues. The same areas that are seeing public services being slashed are witnessing in the region of £10 billion being squandered on the games, which will bring very little of lasting benefit into these communities, and which is causing massive short term disruption – a clear exposition of the priorities of those in power.

The Economist raised the alarm as to how “*By dreadful coincidence members of the International Olympic Committee came over this week to see how preparations for next year’s games were going; most of the events will take place near the scene of some of the worst rioting.*” Presumably just as repression was used before the Mexican Olympics in 1968 when hundreds of protesting students were gunned down, the severe sentences being handed down are designed in part to reassure the Olympic committee that London will be kept passive for the games. The jailing of so many sons, daughter, brothers and sisters from the area where the Olympics are to be held adds a third layer of insult to the local population. The reality of the Olympics was brought home when one of the first women jailed was a 18-year-old local athlete, who had been chosen as an ‘Olympic Ambassador’, and had met with Britain’s Olympics chief Seb Coe and London Mayor Boris Johnson!

## Class and race

The mainstream left political narrative on the riots, where it has gone beyond simply dismissing the rioters as mindless thugs, has often focused instead on the racial element, in an attempt to fit what is happening into the convenient mould of a ‘race riot’ – the murder of a black man by a (probably) white police man, the winding up of local tensions though black youth being harassed through constant stop and searches, and so on.

There is certainly some validity to this analysis: black youths are 26 times more likely to be “randomly” stopped and searched by police than their white counterparts, and are disproportionately more likely to be injured or killed by police.

In the UK, as elsewhere, poverty correlates strongly with membership of an ethnic minority. According to Oxfam “*Sixty-nine per cent of Bangladeshi and Pakistani people live in poverty in the UK, compared to 20 per cent of the white population.*” And although this does mean that the majority of those in poverty in the UK are white, in inner London, where the riots started, 70% of the poor are from minority ethnic groups. This is not a coincidence, but rather a symptom of a system which uses racism as a weapon to divide the working-class in order to preserve the privilege of a (predominantly white) elite class.

Issues such as police brutality and harassment, unemployment, and poverty are not exclusively the purview of ethnic minorities. They are class issues, which affect the poorest and most marginalised sections of the working class of all races, and reflect the contempt with which the police treat working-class people. This is reflected in the mixed ethnic makeup of the rioters.

The Guardian poll commissioned after the riots showed only 1% of the population saw racial tension as a cause although 5% did say it was the shooting of Mark. The vast majority choose the reactionary explanations of ‘criminality’ (45% with rich people more likely to opt for that explanation) or ‘lack of respect within families and communities’ (28%). The range of somewhat

progressive interpretations of what caused the riot only totalled to 21%. *“Only 8% think a lack of jobs for young people is the main reason. A further 5% say the shooting by the police of Mark Duggan, which led to the initial disorder in Tottenham, was the main cause, while 4% blame the coalition government, 2% the police and 2% the state of the economy.”*

While, at a rhetorical level, British officialdom may have acknowledged the problem of institutional racism and embraced multi-culturalism since the riots of the 1980s, little has been done to meaningfully address the structural racism which pervades British society; ‘sensitivity training’ and other such initiatives do little to change the police racism which characterise the direct experience of urban blacks. However, this simplistic narrative, which views race in isolation from class oppression, has little explanatory power for the totality of the four nights of rioting.

Why is this so? The simple explanation is that the police do not take racism in the force sufficiently seriously. A more satisfactory response recognises the disproportionate percentage of minorities that are found in the poorest and most marginalised section of the working class, and recognises that the central role of the police in enforcing the laws that make capitalism function means they target that section that has the least to lose and the most to gain by breaking those laws.

## **How do racism & poverty intersect**

In an interview for WSM.IE, Alex Carver, who witnessed the riots, argues *“The police are slammed again and again about the racism that must be endemic in the Force due to the figures for Stop and Search and the prison population; if they alone could do something about it, they would have. I think the truth is that demanding the figures change is just a game politicians play to complicate a straightforward class and poverty issue — that the geographic areas the prison population and kids who get regularly Stopped come from, are poor areas abandoned by the political class, with demands unmet by the economy.”*

If that analysis is correct, then structural racism is an inevitable consequence of a capitalist system which has trapped a large proportion of ethnic minorities in poverty and exclusion. It is telling that the counter-argument that is trotted out, again and again, when poverty and exclusion are suggested as causes for the riots is the example of the individual who managed to escape the trap. In this phase of capitalism, when crisis results in social services being slashed, the only ‘solution’ advocated is individual escape and increasingly strident calls for externally imposed discipline. This cannot be an argument against fighting institutional racism but it should make it clear that, in particular in a period of crisis, this is not a fight that can be won, but that conditions will continually recreate that racism.

The USA provides a useful proof of this where after the victories of the civil rights movement majority Black (or Hispanic) cities came to have majority Black (or Hispanic) city councils and police forces. But in cities where this is true, like Atlanta, Detroit, El Paso, Miami, and Washington, victims of police violence continue to be disproportionately drawn from Black and Hispanic populations. Researcher Ronald Weitzer, in the article “Can the police be reformed?”, comments that, while US studies show *“black officers are more likely than their white counterparts to believe that police treat minorities and the poor worse than whites and middle-class people ..most research shows that black and white officers differ little in how they actually treat citizens. When it comes to behavior, officers are mainly “blue,” not black, brown, or white.”*

## Who actually rioted?

The most effective argument against the idea that racism was the sole or even main driving force of the rioting after the first night, is that many of those who rioted were white. This in itself would demonstrate nothing – in the so-called race riots of the 1980's many whites choose to fight the police alongside the ethnic minorities who were the direct targets of police racism out of political solidarity. But looting a Curry's electronics shop is not so much about solidarity as common interest. The many photos taken of the looters, as well as the eyewitness accounts of those who took part, make clear it was a multi-ethnic crowd.

The first of the court cases confirmed this, the Telegraph reporting, for instance, that of those in court *“only a minority had no record. Many seemed to be career criminals. Most were teenagers or in their twenties, but a surprising number were older. Most interestingly of all, they were predominantly white, and many had jobs.”* The jobs actually listed included a scaffolder, a postman, and someone working in a school for £1,000 a month – although true to form the Torygraph glossed over those poorly-paid and often insecure occupations in favour of breathlessly leading with a report that one of the many dragged before the special court sitting was *“Laura Johnson, the 19-year-old daughter of a successful company director.”*

The first people jailed in Manchester (pictured right) included a call centre worker and a biscuit factory worker. Others included an unemployed chief and a trainee hairdresser. A homeless man who was accused of stealing food was remanded, a man who *‘swore at and struggled with officers who suspected him of being a looter because he was wearing dark hooded clothing and riding a bicycle’* got 10 weeks. Meanwhile in London a student was given 6 months for stealing a bottle of water.

Overall, the pictures that has emerged of those arrested is one where what they have in common is being on benefits or in low paid jobs, or, if teenagers, from families in such circumstances. Police mug shots do no-one any favours, but, all the same, the faces of many of those that have appeared in the papers seem to tell their own stories – of hardship, poverty, and exclusion. The Sun delighted in comparing one man to the Frank Gallagher character in Shameless, but it's certainly true that you'd easily pick them out from an alternative line up composed of well fed and pampered politicians and business men. Indeed the homeless man mentioned above who was being held for allegedly stealing food was not alone, a 17 year old girl also admitted taking bags of food from a bakery. A high percentage are accused of just stealing alcohol and/or cigarettes.

There are of course exceptions, such as the Laura mentioned above, but the general pattern is those being jailed in the aftermath of the riot are poor and from all ethnic groups – but with minorities over-represented, presumably due to a combination of the make-up of the areas rioting took place in, the massive over-representation of minorities in the poorest 10% of the population, and probably a good old sprinkling of police racism.

## Inter community tensions, shop keepers, class & defence squads

In terms of any discussion of how race intersected the rioting, a disturbing feature was the potential for conflict between the rioters and different ethnic groups who formed defence squads. In Birmingham this did lead to tragedy and the deaths of three members of one such informal

squad. If the rioters were, in many cases, multi-ethnic, these squads were often mono-ethnic and led by the local business owners.

Police strategy in London during the riots seems to have been to temporarily abandon the impoverished areas in order to contain the riot and protect the city and West End, where real wealth might be found. Heading for the West End is a traditional aspect of most political riots in inner London but, although rioters targeted expensive shops in Birmingham city centre, in London the rioting has been almost completely contained within the impoverished areas where the rioters live.

The London Daily News quoted a *‘leader member of the Green Lanes “unit” as declaring “We do not have any trust in the local police, our shops are next on the target list by the thugs who have ransacked Tottenham, we will protect our property.”*

The Guardian also interviewed one of those involved, coffee shop owner Yilmaz Karagoz, who said *“There were a lot of them. We came out of our shops but the police asked us to do nothing. But the police did not do anything so, as more came, we chased them off ourselves.”* The staff from a local kebab restaurant ran at the attackers, doner knives in their hands. *“I don’t think they will be coming back.”*

In part this is a reflection of class tensions which, as with the LA riots, sees a hard working but relatively poor middle class drawn from one ethnic group owning the corner shops in communities where the majority are from another ethnic group. If this is an expression of class tension it is, however, not one that is useful at all from an anarchist perspective. The local fighting between the poor working class and the poor middle class only serves to reinforce and protect the rule of those with the real wealth, and leads to workers from those ethnic groups siding with their bosses. The same report made clear that Turkish and Kurdish workers were alongside their bosses in defending the retail outlets where they worked. Karagoz gave a summary of their outlook, saying *“We have businesses and work hard for what we have. As parents we want our children to work, earn money and be able to buy what they want, not steal it. Our young people know we would be ashamed of them if they were doing this.”* As an alternative, this is identical to that promoted by the Tories.

However this perspective is not unchallenged. Turkish and Kurdish community activists delivered a press speech August 10<sup>th</sup> on Green Lanes, on behalf of *“nine different charities that support Turkish and Kurdish Community members”* that condemned the police and the bulk of the media. In particular they singled out the BBC’s gagging of Darcus Howe. They accused the police of trying to create inter-ethnic violence between the Turkish and Kurdish community and the *“black youth who are rising up to fight the police.”*

The situation in Southall appeared to be similar, with the BBC quoting Satjinder Singh, from the UK Sikhs, as saying *“We started getting texts that there’s a high probability of looters were going to try to attack Southall because of the high number of jewellery shops that are there and because of the proximity of the jewellery shops to the Sikh temple and other places of worship, the Sikhs felt it was essential for us to protect our place of worship.”* In a TV interview a member of the organising committee says they are protecting all of Southall, including Muslims, Christians and Hindus.

The cross-class make-up of the defence squads which united workers with employers on communal grounds should give some pause for those on the left who have tended to embrace them uncritically in a bid to distance themselves from the riots. The retail workers’ union, USDAW, issued a statement reminding its members that *“they should never put themselves in physical danger to prevent shoplifting, looting or damage to property.”* But, as with the rioters, it is a mistake

to simply look for an unqualified good or bad aspect to the overall phenomenon. In both cases these are products of a particular economic and political situation that contain elements that can be built on but also elements that need to be challenged.

## Far-right fantasy

All these examples are ones that saw one minority ethnic group confronting the rioters in defence of their premises. This may or may not result in long term tensions, but what is considerably more worrying is that the racist English Defence League (EDL) seems to have taken advantage of the spread of fear to mobilise what appeared to be all-white groups. In Eltham the Guardian quoted one man declaring *“This is a white working-class area and we are here to protect our community.”* However the ability of the EDL or British National Party (BNP) to convince any significant sections of the public they are there to protect them has got to be very limited, coming so soon after the EDL-connected Anders Behring Breivik murdered so many defenceless children in Norway.

And although the far right will be fantasising that this is the start of the race war they have long dreamt of, the reality is that the rioters seem to be quite integrated, and united by poverty and exclusion rather than race. In addition, both far-right groups are caught in something of a bind as, in recent years, they have been saying the ‘Black British are OK; it’s just the British Muslims we hate’. With British Muslims at the front line of the anti-riot local defence squads and the riot starting with protests at the killing of a Black British man, the rank and file of the far right must be even more seriously confused.

What is far more worrying is the tragic deaths of three British Asians in Birmingham’s Winston Green, after they were apparently ran over by a car load of British African-Caribbeans, part of an alleged four car convoy that was suspected of intending to loot in the area and which it is reported some 80 Asian men had mobilised against. Those on the scene told the Guardian that the police had earlier told them to guard their own businesses as *“They were too busy looking after all the big places in the centre, chasing the mob all night rather than cracking down.”*

Probably only the appeals from the relatives of the dead men for calm prevented the outbreak of inter-communal fighting in the area. That, and the decision to hold a community assembly where the Guardian reported *“300 Muslim and Sikh men gathered to debate how they should respond to the tragedy.”*

## The downside of Spontaneity

The spontaneous nature of the riots, and the apparent lack of informal — never mind formal — political organisation in them, accounts for the random counter-productive nature of much of the looting and arson. This should not be minimised — four people were allegedly killed by rioters for attempting to protect local amenities or businesses.

Unless there is some context we are unaware of, looting and burning a neighborhood bakery or looting a family-owned florist makes no sense, beyond being so carried away with adrenalin that everything starts to look like a target. In this respect the London riots look a lot more like the 1992 LA riots than the riots of the 1980s, or indeed the student riots of last year, when the attacks on buildings appeared to be carefully targeted. Of course, the media coverage has tended to emphasise such attacks. The burning down of an 81-year-old man’s barber shop makes a

much more compelling human interest story than the looting of a Curry's or Footlocker. The court reports to date, as well as eyewitness accounts, suggest the looting of chain stores was very much more common.

It is not unusual in riots for individuals and groups to get carried away, to lose the head, and to start to target all sorts of things. But in conscious political situations, such behaviour will normally be rapidly brought to a halt by other rioters having a word. It is not so unusual in the aftermath of such a riot to see a row of retail premises where the McDonald's, the Starbucks, and the posh car showroom are totally trashed, while the newsagent and cafe in between are almost untouched.

In some areas this appears to have been the case. An anarchist reported from Brixton that *"With only one exception, a Portuguese cafe, every target in Brixton was a major corporate chain store"*. We ourselves interviewed Alex, who witnessed the Hackney riot, and he told us that when with a friend he went into a shop to put out a fire *"we didn't get stopped, lots of the crowd ran in and helped; it was almost as if they were making up their minds."*

You've heard the comments: 'They should get a job instead of trying to take a new pair of trainers from Footlocker, or a plasma screen off the bookies wall'. The Twitterati say things like 'I can understand it if they were stealing a bag of rice but they are just stealing laptops.' Riots don't work like that. If you create a society which is largely based on consumption, you should not be surprised when a 14-year-old seizes the opportunity to get a new pair of trainers. What you need to look at is not the nature of the riot but why the riot is taking place.

In 2009, 'The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better' was published. In this book, the authors, Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, argued and demonstrated via statistical evidence that, in societies with large inequalities, there is an erosion of trust, increased anxiety and illness, and excessive consumption is positively encouraged. The eleven areas that it focused on it displayed significantly poorer outcomes in physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage pregnancies, and child well-being in more unequal societies. Effectively the sub-title 'Why greater equality makes societies stronger' sums up the arguments being made.

## **The politics of fear**

The reports we have had of anarchist involvement in the rioting have tended to be of anarchists trying to stop the destruction of local shops, but this seems to have been quite localised. But reports we have received are also at odds with the picture painted by the mainstream media, of a feral mob attacking everyone and everything in sight. Instead we have been told that bystanders and spectators are generally being ignored. There are clearly exceptions to this (there is YouTube footage of people being mugged), but given that tens of thousands have been involved in rioting and looting it seems these incidents are the exception rather than the rule, but an exception that is being used to spread fear and panic.

We have no objection to the looting of chain stores like Curry's or the Footlocker that occurred during the rioting but we are also not inclined to cheer it on as something amazing. What is of greater concern is the widespread setting of fires. This can very easily result in unintended tragedy if people are in the buildings set ablaze, or when the fire spreads to neighboring buildings.

Last year in Greece three bank workers died in such a fashion and, apart from the tragedy of their deaths, this had a massive demobilising effect on the movement.

Alex, who we interviewed, had gone to witness the riot in his work clothes. Much of the sensationalist media coverage would have led you to believe he would inevitably be set upon and mugged but while acknowledging that things were not the same everywhere, Alex reported *“The kids robbed the shops because that’s where the stuff is. They attacked the cops because they’d stop them. It was simultaneous, it was not two groups of people, one with a beef against the cops and another with light fingers – it was one group of mainly young people. They didn’t attack each other, rape people, mug people – I was able to walk freely amongst them in my shirt and slacks straight from work; lots of people who were obviously not rioting walked with the crowd in daylight – many have said the mood turned later on but actually I stayed with it with a friend, who was also not dressed to fit in, until after midnight.”*

This is a very different picture to that painted by the media or the frenzy of panicked speculation that dominated Twitter during the riots. In both cases, the picture painted was of a feral mob roaming the streets and attacking everything and everyone on sight. These fear-laden speculations were ornamented with terms like ‘scum,’ ‘vermin,’ ‘rats’, intended to dehumanise the rioters and make them fair game for repression.

## Consequences of ‘scum’

The ‘feral mob’ is a standard media story produced whenever there is large-scale breakdown of law and order. There is a need for responsibility in choosing to accept and repeat such stories, because the fear they provoke creates the atmosphere where the police can use extreme repression. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, horrific stories were told and widely accepted about mob violence in New Orleans, stories that generated a climate where police shot down black people trying to flee the city – most infamously at Danziger Bridge when five members of a family trying to cross the bridge were shot, one fatally, as well as a 40-year-old man with several mental difficulties. Afterwards, these stories were found to be mostly false, the three deaths were not murders, and, on September 11 2005, the New Orleans Police Superintendent admitted that there were “no confirmed reports of any type of sexual assault.”

The media, the spin doctors, and the talking heads have been busy advancing the idea that the people who rioted are merely thugs and criminals, in an attempt to dehumanise them. This is a dangerous phenomenon: once the rioters have been successfully made into sub-humans in the public consciousness, the opportunity for new levels of repression opens up.

The impact this process is having can be seen in the results of the YouGov poll carried out for the Sun. It found that 33% thought *“police should be able to use firearms/live ammunition”* and support for ‘less lethal’ options was far higher: *“9 out of 10 respondents (90%) thought that the police should be able to use water cannon in the course of dealing with rioters. The potential use of other tactics also proved very popular with mounted police (84%), curfews (82%), tear gas (78%), tasers (72%) and plastic bullets (65%) all attracting support from a large majority”*.

This idiocy is all the more remarkable when we remember that the trigger for these riots was the police killing of Mark Duggan. Apparently the solution to murderous police violence is to be more murderous police violence. A ‘solution’ that, of course, will just result in further rounds of rioting, just as it did under Thatcher in the 1980s.

This dehumanisation has other consequences. With 1500 arrested, it is now clear that huge numbers are going to be criminalised and jailed by a state desperate to reassert its authority. The first court cases that are being heard have made it clear that the judges are taking their central role of protecting capitalism and the state very seriously. Insanely harsh sentences are being imposed, like the 22 year old woman jailed for 6 months after she was caught with 10 packs of chewing gum.

Alongside this, the police are to get additional powers and, it can be expected, will step up attempts to control public space. There is talk of evicting anyone convicted (along with their family) from council accommodation and stopping any benefits they claim. The first eviction papers have already been served in Clapham, on a tenant whose son has been charged with participating in the riots. Even in right-wing terms this is sheer lunacy, how exactly would a homeless ex-prisoner with no income be expected to live? Just how alienated might such a person feel from the rest of society? What happens when, in a few months, hundreds of them are released with no home to return to, no benefits, and it being next to impossible to find work? The state expects to get away with this because so much of the population has joined in the dehumanisation of the rioters. The end result will inevitably be even deeper exclusion and resentment and, with this response, next time there will be an even more unfocused lashing out.

## **Riots are often contradictory**

Everyone has an opinion on the riots and it's striking how many of those who embraced riots and even insurrection in the distant and not-so-distant past can only seek to dehumanise those who riot in Britain today. As we have seen, there were extremely serious problems with the conduct of some of the rioters. But while these problems may be worse than riots of more recent times in Britain, they are not new. The nature of a mass spontaneous riot means that they always contain many elements. The London rioters included some gangsters and anti-social opportunists using the riot as a cover to attack the vulnerable. This is a frequent feature of riots, and it is the weakness of any formal or informally organised political presence that has allowed them to get away with this.

The reality is riots are often unfocused expressions of anger. People are smart enough to know that they have no stake in society as it currently is set up. What they have witnessed is inter-generational poverty and lack of opportunities. As it happened to their fore-fathers, it is happening to them. Social mobility is a myth which no-one is buying, because it is the capitalist equivalent of a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The game is rigged and they always end up losing. The political system does not cater, care, or listen to the people who riot. No-one is listening to them, no-one is speaking for them, and certainly no-one is planning to invest in their future. When you can't see a future for yourself, and when you have not seen a future for your parents or your grandparents materialise, torching a building or looting a shop is a cry to be heard, a cry for survival.

In March 1968 Martin Luther King delivered that speech to a hostile audience at an American High School during which he talked of the violent riots that had shaken US cities during the preceding summers, riots that were to culminate in an orgy of destruction following his own assassination a short time later. He was a pacifist but he still proclaimed that



*“...it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard.”*

Hackney Unites released “A Message to the Youth Of Hackney” on August 9<sup>th</sup>, which echoed this warning: *“participating in a riot can appear like an act of rebellion and a response to a complex series of problems: giving the police a hard time for once, and adopting the stereotypes of recklessness, criminality and brutality with which you are so often labelled. However, a riot destroys what little we have in terms of our community assets, it also places the rioters, as well as bystanders at great risk.”* and continuing *“In America, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, the black ghettos erupted. Yet, where the Black Panther Party organised, the most militant of black radical organisations, they called on the community not to riot, but to organise for justice. We urge you to do the same.”*

The riots of 1967 that King was referring to were magnitudes more nasty and contradictory than anything that has happened in London. But King’s approach was not to call on people to go back home and accept their lot but rather to ask if there was a better way to organise their dissent:

*“I’ve been searching for a long time for an alternative to riots on the one hand and timid supplication for justice on the other and I think that alternative is found in militant massive non-violence.”*

Unlike King we do not think those fighting back should only limit their resistance to non-violence; a riot is one of many tools that might be used when the circumstances are right and which will in any case spontaneously explode when the circumstances impose as they did this time. But King’s words are a useful reminder to the left, and the liberals whose reaction to the riots was limited to a condemnation of those involved – and all too often accompanied by a call for repression to restore normality. If you don’t want to see the messy and destructive outcomes of a riot, the task is not to lecture those who at least dare to resist, but to organise for an alternative, more effective way of resisting.

If the state really jails hundreds, as it appears it intends to, we may well see prison riots, just as prison riots followed the mass jailings in the aftermath of the Great Poll Tax Riot of 1990, which at the time saw the same media frenzy about yobs, thugs, and scum, but which today is broadly popular as being the end of Thatcher. Indeed a painting of the riot in Trafalgar square that day now hangs in the Museum of London.

## **What will change?**

Penny Red blogged about hearing one NBC report, a young man in Tottenham was asked if rioting really achieved anything:

*“Yes,” said the young man. “You wouldn’t be talking to me now if we didn’t riot, would you? Two months ago we marched to Scotland Yard, more than 2,000 of us, all blacks, and it was peaceful and calm and you know what? Not a word in the press. Last night a bit of rioting and looting and look around you.”*

The riot certainly focused the attention of the media and generated more discussion on racism, poverty, and exclusion in the press than had been seen in the previous year. But while better

than being ignored, press coverage achieves nothing in itself, and this positive coverage has to be balanced against the very successful campaign of dehumanisation and decriminalisation being run, as well as five deaths, 1500 arrests, and an unknown number of injuries. As with previous riots once the panic dies down public opinion will probably start to shift from the extreme 'hang them high' attitudes on display at the moment but even so it is clear that the riots are to be the excuse for more repressive laws and the even greater marginalisation and criminalisation of the poorest section of the working class.

Unfortunately, in the short term, what we are likely to see is a massive ramping-up of police repression, in an attempt to ensure that the good name of London is not tarnished by the events so that they can build for the Olympics. What we will not see emerge from this is a society or a political system where people get to have a say and a stake in their futures. That type of system is not on the cards under capitalism. It cannot be tolerated and this type of thought is viewed as seditious by the powers that be.

The underlying causes of the riot are not something that is fixable by the classic liberal solution of opening up the youth club and putting in a few extra pool tables. That can only be done when you tackle wealth inequalities. The politicians who let the bankers cream off £14 billion in bonuses this year are not about to do that. The entrepreneurs who have a lot of investments riding on getting the punters in for the Olympics are not about to do that. The massive landgrab in the name of the Olympics is not about to be derailed because of this. What you will see is higher levels of police repression and containment. People will be severely punished for 'burning down their communities', in order to ensure next time they don't head for Chelsea or the West End.

The political masters are playing a dangerous game. They want to spin these riots as nothing but 'mindless' thuggery. But people have been watching the streets of various cities become the platform for change over the last six months, from Tunis to Cairo, from Damascus to Madrid. Our rulers certainly do not want to see these riots turn into that — a massive display of public defiance and civil unrest against the existing system, a system where inequality and injustice are rampant, and the desperate NEED for something else. Yet it is our duty as citizens of the world to turn these displays of anger into a directed political fight for change.

The capitalist system offers no solutions for the root causes of the riots. It can only respond with greater violence and police repression against these communities, and perhaps a few tokenistic attempts at engagement or less likely amelioration of the worst effects of poverty, in an attempt to make the problem disappear temporarily from the public eye. Poverty, alienation, disenfranchisement, and violence are inevitable in a system that bases itself on a division between rulers and ruled, rich and poor, bosses and workers, and these things reach their worst excesses during capitalism's periodic crises. The only solution is to create a society in which everyone has a real stake, and in which everyone has meaningful control over their own lives, workplaces and communities. That type of system is not on the cards under capitalism, as evinced by the failure of both the social democratic and neo-liberal projects to address the real needs and concerns of ordinary people. It can only be achieved by harnessing the type of anger currently being seen on the streets of Britain against capitalism through the mass organisation of the working class.

The riots have lain down a marker around which everyone is choosing a side. Do you want the 'security' of the all powerful Big Brother state that can keep the rich safe in their beds while the poor are literally thrown on the street or if they resist into prison? A state that can make sure that those who cannot afford the pretty baubles will be kept at a distance, restricted to staring through plate glass or serving those who have the ready to pay? Perhaps with enough water

canon, baton rounds, and CCTV the status quo can be preserved. Or does that world not even begin to approach the limits of your desires? Does their utopia start to feel like the same jail cell that preserving means throwing so many into?

The world is polarised and sides must be chosen. We have not shied from criticising the flaws, blind stupidity and at times cruelty of these riots. But does a return to their status quo offer us anything, even the empty illusion of safety? To return to MLK, if a riot is not the answer, then what is? With confidence, we say it is certainly not more of the same. If we want freedom then we must organise to fight for freedom and convince others to fight alongside us. Together we have the power. The question is, will we organise to use it?

**\*\*\* *Afterword: Why an article from Ireland***

It might seem somewhat curious that an anarchist group in Ireland should put so much effort into understanding a riot in England. It shouldn't be — apart from the fact that London continues to rule the north east of Ireland (where there have been no qualms about using water cannon, baton rounds, and even live fire against rioters) we are connected in many other ways. This also gives us a perspective of not always seeing riots as a good thing, and of being wary of the dangers of mono-ethnic defence squads. The north has seen many reactionary riots and death squads dressed up as defence squads.

Two of the authors of this piece are amongst those who literally built London during spells living and working there. We still travel back and forth regularly, and maintain contact with both friends and comrades who live, work, and struggle in that vast sprawl. We've seen and indeed participated in protests and riots, squatted in Hackney, and generally, like hundreds of thousands of returned migrant workers, retain some claim to the city.

There are disadvantages. We did not participate in or even see the events we discuss in this article — although if we had, perhaps we would not be able to write so freely. All we have to go on is discussion with comrades there, the acres of words now in print from the media and bloggers, and the dozens of Youtube uploads. These all tell a story, but we cannot truly claim it is the story of what really happened.

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Andrew Flood and Dermot Sreenan  
London burns – causes & consequences of the riots  
An anarchist perspective  
August 18, 2011

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