

Police threaten summer of order for Britain

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I don't know about you, but when I think of the coming summer my dreams are of soft fruit and sunlight on skin. My fantasies are of playing with friends at the beach or in the park, of reading novels and growing vegetables. If his recent press release is anything to go by, Police Superintendent David Hartshorn's fantasies are of a different order.

In his fantasy story (press release), the police are knights in shining armour (and riot gear is shiny...) protecting vulnerable citizens from being recruited by dastardly political extremists. Together they would threaten Britain with a "summer of rage". Even normally rational middle-class people are vulnerable to manipulation at the moment, police say, because of their anger during this time of economic insecurity. "Known activists," kind of like known terrorists or known murderers, are set to take advantage of this anger-induced susceptibility to recruit "footsoldiers" for their causes. (Nevermind any minor distinctions between neo-fascist groups like Combat 18 and grassroots movements like the London Coalition Against Poverty. This might confuse the story of good cops versus violent extremists.)

It is clear to me that in this police fantasy, order means a certain economic order and violence is anything interrupting the flow of profit. How else can the recent action of Greek farmers blocking roads out of desperation be understood as violence? Ah, but, police say, "History shows" (and who can dispute History?) that disputes like the miners strike caused tension in the community. (Nevermind the histories which suggest tensions came from Thatcher's neoliberal policies combined with that age-old strategies of divide and rule.) The police also fear that more people may join with environmentalists to express their rage at "oil companies [who are] *seen* to be turning over billions of pounds profit in issues that are *seen* to be against the environment" (my emphasis).

When blocking the destruction of their livelihoods, whether in the immediate sense of their jobs or in the ultimate sense of the ecosystems of which they are a part, ordinary people are recast, in these State fantasies, as the source of violence. Meanwhile, the violence of the State is always told as legitimate, as necessary for order.

Reading these police stories, I suspect that they are not afraid of extremists. What they are afraid of is that people like me, who do not hold the official faith in State and Market, are not extremists at all. In the face of ecological and social devastation, belief in these institutions of power is crumbling while their faithful promoters are suddenly the ones at risk of appearing to be the extremists.

This shows most clearly in a lack of compassion for “victims of the economic downturn.” Does Superintendent Hartshorn have any empathy for the rage of those who have lost their jobs, their homes and their hopes for climate stability? If so, he doesn’t show it in his press release. Perhaps to do so would be unprofessional. It would certainly question the supreme value of law and (profit-centred) order. It would show a question of faith. And those in positions of authority who publicly question their faith are ridiculed. Witness the media response seven years ago when PC Brian Paddick “confessed” that anarchism has always appealed to him.

The activists I know (are they the same ones that Hartshorn knows?) value order, but not the stuff of his fantasies. The difference is, for those of us who support and help organise Climate Camps, Transition Towns, social centres, feminist health networks, grassroots unions and the like, order comes out of cooperation and mutual care. And even those normally rational middle-class people who might have been expected to laugh at the utopian idealism of these projects might see their appeal as the financial structures they have come to depend on for security stop working for them.

That might be a frightening thought, indeed, for those who only imagine order coming from control.

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