



# Analysis

A REVIEW OF CURRENT ISSUES

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## A SUMMER OF DISCONTENT?

Recent disorder in nine towns and cities follows a pattern of urban unrest which has evolved over the past twelve years. But there are many contrasts with the serious riots in Brixton and Liverpool in 1981 and individual incidents this year have been on a smaller scale. Both waves of violence occurred, however, in the depths of recession.

Activists from a number of extreme political groups are trying to exploit tensions. The Socialist Workers Party and the anarchist Class War group have organised rallies in towns and cities hit by trouble and the SWP is attempting to link the rioting with protests about job cuts and economic issues and is also directing its message to ethnic groups.

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**Economic  
League**

Once again the peace of an English summer has been shattered by the tumult of disorder on the streets. Over the past twelve years the pattern has become all-too familiar: an incident involving the police, such as a drugs raid, a car chase, or the arrest of a suspect, sparks off a confrontation in which gangs of youths throw stones and petrol bombs at the police, and set fire to shops and community facilities for three or four successive nights, until they tire or the police are adequately reinforced to regain control.

Most of these disturbances take everyone by surprise. That is, until the armies of the media and the experts descend on the scene and discover that there was a 'time bomb waiting to go off', that the afflicted area has high unemployment, and in some cases a history of racial tension. But no two communities, and no two riots, are identical and there are always many other purely local factors to explain why a disturbance occurred where and when it did and why it took the form it did.

After the event, the government is sometimes persuaded to review its programmes for deprived areas, the police revise their tactics and their approach to community relations, while businesses and residents have to rebuild their daily lives out of the rubble. And, as always, political extremists of every shade fan the flames by trying - if they were not able to involve themselves during the actual violence - to exploit tense situations.

#### Catalogue of Violence

The outbreaks of street violence so far this year are no exception to the general rule. They have affected housing estates in at least nine towns and cities all over the country: Coventry, Stockton-on-Tees, Luton, Salford, Bristol, Carlisle, Burnley, Blackburn and Huddersfield. In Salford, on the Ordsall estate, trouble began following a police operation directed against car crime. There were disturbances spread over a week at the beginning of July, during which gunshots were fired at police and firefighters. On the Hartcliffe estate in Bristol in the middle of the same month, the disorder broke out when two youths who had stolen a police motor-cycle died in a collision with another police vehicle. A mob of a hundred subsequently burned down the community centre and looted shops. In Huddersfield in late July, the rioting was prompted by the arrest of five people for drugs offences. And in Blackburn at the same time, there was fighting between Indian and Pakistani youths arising from conflicts over drugs trafficking, which Muslim leaders had tried to stop. There, up to eight hundred people turned on the police who were attacked with stones and petrol bombs. During these

various disturbances more than 200 people were arrested, with 86 of those detained held in Burnley and over 70 in Bristol.

#### A Decade of Disorder

One of the first of the present wave of 'spontaneous' urban riots took place in Bristol in March 1980. This was followed the next year by major outbreaks in Brixton, Southall, Liverpool and Manchester, with lesser disturbances in several other parts of London and in several other cities. The scale and the spread of the violence was the most serious in Britain for a century. Damage ran into millions of pounds, with hundreds injured and 2-3,000 people were arrested. After the Brixton riots of April 1981, the government set up an enquiry under Lord Scarman, which was extended in July that year to cover other trouble spots, such as Liverpool-Toxteth and Manchester Moss Side.

Four years later, there were serious riots in the Handsworth area of Birmingham, Brixton and in Tottenham, where PC Blakelock was hacked to death. During the latter half of the 1980s, the focus switched from the inner cities to smaller, country towns and rural areas, as the phenomenon of the 'lager lout' was born. Only at the end of summer last year did attention turn back to urban problems, with confrontation between gangs and the police on the Blackbird Leys estate in Oxford, the Meadow Wells estate in

**"We want communities to take up arms against police and the ruling classes. Los Angeles was the spark." A 'Class War' spokesman, July 1992.**

North Shields and in Cardiff, Birmingham and Coventry. During this time the police also had to contend with many other forms of collective violence. There were clashes in industrial disputes, such as those in the miners' strike of 1984-5 and the Wapping dispute two years later. There were also the problems of football hooliganism, cat-and-mouse games with 'hippy' travellers, and the occasional flare-ups with 'Class War' anarchists and animal rights protesters.

Although the 1980s appeared to be a particularly turbulent decade, the period from the mid sixties had also been a very troubled one. Industry saw the emergence of flying pickets in the building workers' dispute of 1972 and the two miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974. There were also numerous violent demonstrations, beginning with the anti-Vietnam war protests in 1969-70, and the long confrontation between the National Front and its opponents in the Anti Nazi League, and especially, the Socialists Workers Party.

From the mid-sixties to 1980, however, most outbursts of trouble had political or industrial causes and were short-

lived. Only in the past decade has violence spread more widely to affect whole communities and become a running sore which appears to threaten the very fabric of society. The response of politicians, churchmen and commentators alike to the riots of 1981 was one of shock and alarm. Many steps were taken to improve economic and social conditions in the worst hit areas. But do the renewed incidents mean that these measures have failed or that worse is to come?

There are some important differences between what happened in the 1980s and the events of the last twelve months. The most obvious is that the recent wave of violence had been much less intense. The financial costs of all this year's incidents combined are less than those incurred in the 1981 Brixton riots alone. The numbers of people involved in the vast majority of current disturbances have been smaller than in the main riots of the 1980s, and the level of violence has generally been lower (with the disturbing exceptions of the shooting incidents in Manchester and the arson and looting in Bristol). Apart from Blackburn, racial factors have been absent from recent clashes, whereas they were a major element of earlier confrontations in Brixton, Toxteth and Tottenham. Previous riots were often centred on decaying inner cities (with Tottenham the exception), while 1990s' riots have broken out on mainly post-war housing estates. There are also some common features. The violence involves youths from areas which are relatively deprived, where unemployment is higher than average, and often where relations with the police are poor and where criminality and drugs are rife and gangs operate in well-defined territories.

In other respects circumstances have worsened over the last ten years. Now, a routine incident on a Saturday night can turn into a menacing confrontation: young people see from television how easy - and exciting - it is to get away with throwing stones at policemen and how simple and effective a few home-made petrol bombs can be. And when the police arrive in full riot gear what would have merited a few lines in the local newspaper as a closing-time brawl receives wider attention as a full-scale riot and another symptom of the country's smouldering social crisis.

#### The Debate on Causes

Sociologists and legions of other experts have filled volumes with discussion of the causes of modern day urban violence. Everything is blamed, from the effects of global warming which produces hot, humid nights, to the

breakdown of family discipline and respect for authority generally, to unemployment and the effects of a 'get rich quick' philosophy on the minds of young people who are jealous of others' possessions.

Broadly there are two main approaches to analysing the causes of riots: the material, which emphasises economic and social factors and above all unemployment; and the moral, which points to a decline since the 1960s in discipline and in common values in the home, in schools and in the churches, and the rise in crime and the glorification of violence in films and television. The former appeals to critics of government policy and the latter to conservative commentators.

Both camps have agreed that a social 'underclass' has emerged, consisting of the long-term unemployed, the low paid single parent families, inhabitants of decaying areas who are trapped by their environment, under-qualified young people, and members of alienated ethnic minorities. The riots of the last decade have often been described as a revolt of the underclass.

The 'materialist' school of explanation has no difficulty in attributing the plight of this sector of society to the effects of government policies and recession. The 'moralists' however argue that the underclass has been betrayed by mistaken social policies and by incompetent local bureaucracies. They are the very victims of the muddle headed philosophies which have led to so many problems in society.

The debate is inconclusive but is likely to continue as long as the problem persists. Some academics are beginning to revise

the notion of the 'underclass' and its relation to riotous behaviour. Definitions are themselves relative: Britain's social problems are nothing compared to those of eastern Europe or Africa for example, and the composition of any class of people is not fixed for all time.

Unemployment is undoubtedly a contributory factor, but it is not an automatic cause of violence. If it were it would be necessary to explain why there had not been more riots in other centres of high unemployment. But it is the case that the 1981 riots and those this year have taken place in the depths of recession. Brixton and Liverpool were notorious, run-down areas where many people were without jobs. And in parts of the country hit by riots this year, Salford has an unemployment rate of 17 per cent and among ethnic minorities in Blackburn it is 35 per cent. Unemployment itself has to be considered in relation to other problems. In an economic down-turn, services in a whole town or a single estate are adversely affected, shops

**"....confrontation will be repeated time and again across Britain as the recession continues and the Tories cut public spending." 'Socialist Worker', newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party, July 1992.**

and businesses close and the physical environment deteriorates. A culture of lawlessness takes over and a sense of isolation from the rest of society becomes inevitable, together with conflict with the police. The values and attitudes of such a community are different from other more prosperous groups. The problem is both material and moral. No single category or cause offers adequate explanation, and ultimately, it is the combination of factors which provides the conditions in which violence can erupt.

### Extremist Exploitation

Against this background, extremists of both left and right have been attempting to exploit social problems for their own purposes. While there is little evidence to indicate that any political group has triggered off any disorder, there is ample material to show that they are taking a close interest in what happens in places where trouble arises.

The anarchist group, 'Class War' has organised a series of meetings across the country under the title "Summer of Discontent". In July it advertised meetings in Liverpool, Salford, Leeds, Cardiff and Plymouth, and in August promised appearances in Tottenham and Hackney in London, on the Hartcliffe estate in Bristol, Blackbird Leys in Oxford, and in Birmingham and Coventry. Its rallies are to be addressed by a speaker from Los Angeles as well as ones from the local community and 'Class War' itself.

The Los Angeles riots earlier this year had a dramatic effect on the attitudes of revolutionaries in this country. A spokesman for 'Class War' said: "we want communities to take up arms against police and the ruling classes. Los Angeles was the spark...This will be the summer when Tory Britain blazes." So far, however, nothing that has happened in British cities remotely approaches the experience of Los Angeles.

Among Marxist groups, the Socialist Workers Party has also been quick to seize on opportunities offered by street disturbances. It is in no doubt about where the blame lies. After the Bristol riots it declared that "...confrontation will be repeated time and again across Britain as the recession continues and the Tories cut public spending. The riots showed the depth and spread of the recession." The SWP denied that the Los Angeles riots were racial or that they were part of an underclass revolt. Instead it said they represented the resistance of the working class to

exploitation and poverty.

The SWP does not see riots as ends in themselves but as one element of the wider class struggle. It seeks to drive a wedge between local communities and the police and attack local authorities and the government. It also wants to link riots to economic issues. It reported that in Bristol, "socialists who talked of organising against the police, but also fighting unemployment, sackings and cuts, were welcomed."

Race figures highly in SWP propaganda, even though it denies that it is itself promoting racial unrest. In September it is holding a series of rallies about Malcolm X, the American activist who was murdered by Black Muslims in 1965. The SWP believes that his philosophy of socialism allied to black nationalism is highly relevant today and it is one of a number of groups currently promoting his ideas. The SWP has chosen the locations of its rallies with care - they are planned for Brixton and Tottenham in London, and for Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Bristol.

Through the Anti Nazi League, the SWP is also actively opposing groups such as the British National Party. The BNP has recently held several marches, including one in Walsall, where there has also been evidence of Ku Klux Klan activity following the killing of a white man by Asian youths. And when an Afghan refugee was murdered in a recent racial attack in south London, the ANL distributed leaflets and posters in the area and a letter to be handed out in local workplaces.

In all of the issues it pursues, whether it is urban violence or racial conflict, the SWP strives to make a connection with the class struggle in industry. One of its major initiatives at present is to organise a lobby of the TUC meeting in Blackpool in September. It has so far attracted the support of scores of trade union branches, including sections of the AEEU, the TGWU, UCATT, MSF, NALGO, RMT, and the GMB.

It seems probable that as long as the recession lasts, there will be undercurrents of social tension which manifest themselves in outbreaks of violence. The worst predictions of the revolutionaries who want to spread conflict from the streets and into the workplace have failed to materialise. But their efforts are a warning to society that it has to deal with genuine problems before the destructive propaganda of the extremists takes effect. If they succeed in destroying jobs and alienating whole communities from society, the job of recovery will be even more difficult.

