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The London Insurrections

Burn Shit

January 7, 2012

‘Britain is Sick.’ The headline was correct, of course, but for all the wrong reasons. Not so long ago, many people in the country found solace on the weekend of an aristocratic wedding. It felt nice to all unite behind the new ‘People’s Princess’ and her thoroughly modernised royal spouse. How nice it was to forget about crises and austerity on an extra bank holiday so generously granted to us by the Old Etonians of Parliament. A collective hysteria and jingo spectacle gave us a sense of belonging and even purpose. The pseudo-participation of a royal parade, a street party, the flag-waving and cheering, a country unanimous in its appreciation of Royal tradition and ‘*THAT* dress’ and Pippa’s arse – these are what define us; the people, the nation, the values, the heritage – Britain 2011. Still cool Britannia, still the historical convention and ancient mores, the stiff upper lip and the salt of the earth, but adapted to the 21st century. Thank God for British Exceptionalism: Over the last few centuries a reforming establishment has maintained relative calm and a docile populace whilst their European counterparts – the governments and monarchs of the continent – have struggled to contain their own rebels, radicals and agitators.

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Fast forward to August. We already knew this ludicrous narrative was a myth, and one that has been exploded repeatedly by the spontaneous outbursts of a swindled people. This odd notion of a parochial, gradualist, mind-your-own 'nation of shopkeepers' is nothing but an idealised abstraction – a fallacious, Whiggish interpretation of history that suits conservative tastes. The insurrections of the summer were borne of an intense rage and disaffection. What we witnessed was a jumbled, chaotic response to the shit the status quo is throwing at us, the end of a delicate inertia, a loud awakening from a frustrated sleep in which 'protest' was *generalised* to the point where everything was a target and everything was there for the taking. It was a protest without demands, a rebellion without a cause, a display of nihilistic anger launching itself against *the totality*. No platform, manifesto or programme, no leadership demanding some reform or the repeal of some piece of legislation, but a succession of confused acts of destruction that were characterised by a refusal of *all* the conditions of everyday life in post-industrial capitalism. A direct assault on the commodity form and the temporary halt of our retail rituals as people's deep resentment and fury manifested itself against the high-street chainstores, just as they discovered payment for the exalted merchandise was now optional.

The London Riots had been a long time coming. (Insert comparisons with the 80s here – social unrest, Royal weddings, increased industrial militancy, Tory government, poor Police/community relations, blah, blah, blah.) Mark Duggan's death was a spark in a tinderbox. The financial crisis and the subsequent corporate bailouts exposed the system for what it really is *in essence*: parasitic, dead Capital, feeding off living labour, based on state-sanctioned and legitimate looting. It was high time the residents of Tottenham, Peckham, Liverpool and Manchester engaged in some of their own mass-expropriations. Call it a proletarian bailout. Qualitative Easing.

power *on their streets*, and not only the police. The glass facades of Carphone Warehouse and Footlocker, the purveyors of well-marketed signifiers of social status and identity, who compensate staff with five pounds for every hour of tedium and humiliation and somehow expect diligence and loyalty – these were the first to go. These are the sources of our modern malaise and simmering ennui, and they deserve no more respect than the Palace of Westminster or the Tory HQ at Millbank. The rioter never gave them any.

Many on the left have only talked of ‘social exclusion’, as if our society was normally an edifice of peaceful relations that had somehow managed to forget about an ostracised ‘underclass’. As if the solution could be more ‘social inclusion’; to reabsorb these lumpen malcontents into the world of wage-labour and civil society, to guarantee them a future of minimum wage drudgery and voter registration twice a decade – some participation, some inclusion in the racket. After the *banlieue* uprisings in 2005, someone wrote; ‘Those who have found less humiliation and more advantage in a life of crime than in sweeping floors will not turn in their weapons, and prison wont teach them to love society.’

Was this short-lived revolt a hyper-capitalist display of the consumerist ethic in dangerous overdrive; the quick accumulation of sweat-shop commodities and status-symbols by a decadent youth corrupted by... grime and hip hop music!?!? The mass-shoplifting opened the floodgates of materialist false-needs and desires, but here in the place of payment-at-the-till was a liberation of all these goods from their status as commodities. Instead of a price-tag was a debased and subverted exchange value – no money to perform its regulatory function, no currency to mediate or restrict – a free-for-all (re)distribution in which we took *in reality* all that is promised to us by advertising *in abstraction*. Retail capital’s feeble defence left wide open by roaming teenagers who were realising, physically and directly, that the system only works this way because we allow it. And for a short time during the insurrections, the system was at *their* mercy.

As the looted sportswear, phones, nappies, booze and food were strewn over the roads in London, the carnival quickly spread to Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. These rioters have no ideology, no political affiliation and no leadership. This is what makes them uncontrollable and dangerous. This is where their strength lies. They couldn’t have been bought off with any concession or placated by the promise of an independent enquiry: Michael Heseltine’s Garden Festival has lay in ruins for years. Theirs was a *total revolt*, albeit a muddled and disjointed one. What it showed was an untapped *potential*, a disorder that exposed the weak, vulnerable Paper Tigers of authority when faced with an enraged mob with nothing to lose. Of course we can adopt the language of the media/press; these rioters were just selfish, opportunistic chavs, yobs, hoodies, gangs, proles, lumpen. Or we can start borrowing from the politicians’ diatribes; these riots weren’t political, they were motivated by nothing but greed. So they say. But if we take them for their word, what could be more political than greed? This is the ultimate threat to the present (dis)order – not the

Trade Union ‘movement’ or the phoney left: The former being all too cosily rooted in its historical role of integrating workers into wage-labour peaceably, acting as arbiter between labour and capital and channeling all the frustrations and grievances of their membership into nice moderate demands (or polite requests) for quantitative increases in wages or conditions, with paid bureaucrats destroying any genuine militancy or desire with negotiation, compromise and pay settlements. The ‘radical’ left meanwhile, are still soaked with patronising, vanguardist rhetoric and are still committed to the tired old modes of paper-pushing, representation and hierarchical organising. Capital’s gravediggers are the recalcitrant youth, the criminals, the unemployed and the unemployable who refuse most vehemently to be absorbed into societies’ racket.

Presently, there is no political consciousness among them. No concept of the *possibilities*, no concept of what *could be*. What unites them is a shared disaffection, a general discontent and a visceral and innate hatred of the police as the most visible figures of state authority in our communities. We have not seen the (material) ‘immiseration’ of the proletariat that Marx predicted and Bakunin shunned. The ‘massification’ of the workers that He foresaw, and the advent of organised labour did not lead to our world revolution. Taylorism, scientific management, standardisation, increased division of labour, de-industrialisation and the rise of the service economy, Trade Unionism, cheap credit, embourgeoisement and our beloved social safety-nets (through which no-one can fall?) are all part of the same social pacification package. As alienation, drudgery, uniformity and apathy have become the omnipresent hallmarks of our society, we have seen the corresponding perfection of assimilation techniques that have lulled many into a dull passivity. The decades of the white-collar working class, the extraction of surplus value from our cognitive labour, post-fordism, the promises and the myths of social mobility, the paternalistic welfare state, –

through which we depend on Big Government for our very survival – the huge array of products available to all who are willing to sell themselves over on a temporary contract with flexible hours, the plasma screens that allow us some vicarious respite from the commute, the boss, the office politics and the staff meeting, the choices in fashion and gadgets that *define us* and communicate who *we are* through the Order of Signs and Symbols, our decision to choose one ‘Made in an Eastern Workhouse’ iTwat over another. What does *your* phone say about *you*? *I am Mercedes. I am what I am. I am Nikon.* I’m the kind of liberal/creative type that uses a Macbook. I’m the kind of busy, metropolitan man that needs a Blackberry. Consumption, separation, representation, mediation, alienation. Late capitalism’s ‘Bread and Circuses’. And then the riots that shit on all that, whether consciously or not. A Grand Rejection of everything that’s been used to buy us off and keep us kneeling.

It goes without saying that houses going up in flames in London’s ghettos is no call for celebration. It is also obvious that we’d have no moral qualms if they’d instead burnt out the luxury apartments of Chelsea Harbour, the offices of Canary Wharf or better still, raided the mansions of Surrey stockbrokers. But we’ll shed no tears over the charred skeleton of the SONY warehouse, the Pawn-brokers on Peckham high street or the Brixton Nandos. It is telling that swarms of police occupied the shopping districts around Oxford Street and stood guard, fiddling outside the retail Cathedrals of the West End while the suburbs burned. It is also worth mentioning a message on the so-called ‘Peckham Peace Wall’ which reads, ‘Take it to Parliament, Not to Peckham’, and the unsurprising prevalence of, ‘Feds had it coming’ post-its, or words to that effect. But the rioters lashed out against their own immediate surroundings, against *the familiar*. Some even smashed through the windows of the stores in which they worked. Isn’t it obvious why? The square mile and the City of London are worlds away. Their violence had to be directed against the embodiments of arbitrary