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British Riots: It Is Right to Rebel

Chris Hobson

August 28, 2011

“No one has ever given me a chance; I am just angry at how the whole system works” – Louis James, 19, Camden Town (North London)

“You know you all racist! You know it!” – unidentified protester, to London police

Decent people everywhere should support and defend the working class and street youth – mainly but not only Afro-Caribbeans – who rioted and looted in London, Birmingham, Manchester and elsewhere in England for several days starting August 6. They have been called “thugs” and worse by the Conservative government of prime minister David Cameron, but it is these leaders who are the real thugs in Britain today. Nonetheless while the riots were a real and welcome fight-back against police oppression and economic deprivation, there are deep dangers in the situation as well.

The riots began as a spillover from an August 6 protest against the earlier police killing of a Black man, Mark Duggan,

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Retrieved on 6th August 2021 from utopianmag.com
Published in *The Utopian* Vol. 10.

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29. What was planned as an orderly protest march ballooned out of control as hundreds of youths took to the streets and alleys, smashing store windows, looting the contents, keeping in touch by i-phones and text messages, staying one step ahead of the police. The riots spread for several nights before dying down in the face of massive police reinforcements.

We shouldn't be afraid of words like "riot," "out of control," and "looting." What are people supposed to do when they have no jobs and no prospect of ever getting any, when government slashes the so-called "social safety net," when the police treat even orderly youths of color as dangerous thugs? (One protester screamed at the police, over and over, "You know you all racist! You know it!") Should people maintain self-control and not assert control of the streets when they can, should they leave shop windows intact? The government should be reminded that when people have too little and are pushed around too much, and there is a breakdown of law enforcement, rioting and looting are going to take place as surely as night is going to come.

The causes of these riots should be plain to all. Since he took power last year Cameron has been cutting back government services, increasing school fees, slashing medical and housing benefits, cutting every program he could find – on top of a long-term situation of joblessness, hopelessness, and police brutalization attested by those who live in Britain's slums. These cuts are part of a broader economic crisis of capitalism going on all across Europe and in fact globally. (See Ron Tabor's article elsewhere in this issue.) The ruling class's only attempt at a solution is to squeeze those already most vulnerable – instead of themselves. Sooner or later something was going to explode.

But to read about these events in the standard media is to come up against a wall of racism and denial. Articles have alleged that Duggan was a "gang member" (punishable by death?), have focused on youths who took worthless goods, have highlighted those who regretted taking part. Prime

minister Cameron's statement that the riots were "criminality, pure and simple," has been quoted again and again. Scholars have been quoted yes and no on whether "mob psychology" displaces rational thought in riot situations. The reality should be clear – anyone who can coordinate looting through cell-phone communication is acting rationally, but also despises the law.

The riots have now become a political football, with no one to speak for the rioters. Cameron is opportunistically using the current repressive mood to justify his cutbacks. And the English liberals in and around the Labour Party who are trying ineffectually to counter Cameron's policies have talked weakly about social causes of the riots but have condemned the rioters as bitterly as Cameron. They have not dared to say that when people are ground down, ignored, and spat upon, they are right to rebel.

But there is unfortunately a negative side to what happened and it is a real threat. The rioting youths aimed first of all to smash up shops and steal their goods, and naturally, the shopkeepers and their families – lower middle-class people who are also hit hard by Cameron's policies – defended their property when they could. Moreover, many of the shop owners are Indians, Pakistanis, and other South Asians, and so the riots have fed into the already deep racial and cultural split between South Asians and AfroCaribbeans, the two racial groups who are most oppressed in England.

This division reached a very dangerous pitch when a reportedly Afro-Caribbean man drove his car into a line of Asians who had formed to defend local businesses, killing three men. The father of one of the dead played a real hero's role in standing fast against retaliation at a later meeting. "I don't want there to be any more trouble, anyone getting hurt," Tariq Jahan said. "My son died defending the community he lived in. Blacks, Asians, whites – we all live in the same community. Step forward if you want to lose your sons. Otherwise, calm

down and go home, please.” But obviously, the gulf between Afro-Caribbeans and Asians, already gaping wide and deep, has only grown.

Further, the riots run counter to some very long-standing majority British attitudes of respect for authority. The sight of masked and hooded youths moving up and down streets smashing windows was utterly shocking to many ordinary English people, and this fact is one sign of the deep split between the middle class and the poor, which overlies the divide between the two racial minorities.

Clearly, there has to be a real and organized fight-back against Cameron, his party, the cowardly Labour opposition, and the whole economic and political system. It should begin with meetings, marches, and neighborhood organizing against all of Cameron’s cutbacks but it should also denounce the police and call for expanded jobs and free education for all. And crucially, both Afro-Caribbean and Asian youths should be its core. There should be a peace pact between these groups and an alliance against the police and government. Libertarian socialists and anarchists on the local scene must work to forge unity. The need is clear and urgent. Longer term, they should encourage and build thinking that goes beyond these goals and aims to get rid of the whole ruling class, to seize control of society’s wealth and manage society and the economy cooperatively and democratically.

One final point is worth some thought. Though not directly related, the response to the riots is similar to some of the reactions against multiculturalism going on elsewhere in Europe, such as the horrific executions of 69 Norwegian social-democratic youth, many of immigrant background, by Anders Behring Breivik, a self-described Christian monoculturalist, or the increasing support by Dutch voters for the anti-immigrant Freedom Party. The differences are many – notably that in the British riots one racial minority community, South Asians, was defensively pitted against another. And the condemnation

of the rioters was not fueled by anti-Muslim prejudice as in so much of Europe. But similarities are striking too. Cameron’s sneering about “gangs of thugs” with their “lack of morals” reflects a sense of Afro-Caribbean poor and working class people as a profoundly different culture from the prime minister’s own upper middle-class background. It’s a racial, class, and cultural sense, and all these are related. These intolerant reactions are only exacerbated by the economic crisis mentioned earlier; though the prejudice and hatred go way back, they are becoming more intense now, when there is no longer enough prosperity to allow gestures toward limited social betterment.

But multiculturalism as a strain on the traditional European national cultures doesn’t come from misguided liberal policies, as Breivik in Norway mistakenly thought – or from any policies for that matter. It comes from the nature of the global economy, global communications, and global culture. The global economy, completely transnational, has brought and will bring millions of Africans and Asians to Europe, more in the future than in the past. Communications today mean that immigration is no longer, as a century ago, a matter of transplanting oneself to a new land, to see the old one decades later if at all – now one can talk by cellphone from one’s kitchen in Manchester to one’s cousin in Karachi, and visit for a wedding. And the cultures that are building off all this, especially among the young, are global and diverse at the same time. So what the Breiviks and Camerons are reacting against is simply the nature of the modern world; they had better get used to it. Norway will never be “Norwegian,” England never “English,” in the rotten nostalgic senses, again. As James Baldwin so presciently wrote over sixty years ago – while visiting a Swiss village where he was then the only person of color – “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”