

The August 2011 Riots in Britain

For a few days in August 2011, the riots in Britain's cities flashed a searing light across the troubled sleep to which we, the ordinary people of that country, have been reduced by three decades of spiritless submission to the logic of capitalism. The only meaningful questions to ask about the riots are: how far did they go in repudiating the society that dominates us, and how can that repudiation be extended and deepened? Everything else is the howling of dogs.

At the heart of the alienation that turns so much of our lives into unsatisfying nonsense are two processes. First we are obliged to squander vast amounts of time, energy and creativity on the idiotic work through which our masters achieve their ends and create their world. Then we are expected to compensate ourselves for this dispossession by spending the rest of lives buying back what we have been forced to produce and acting out the images of contented consumption we are given to believe. Quite properly, the rioters attack this vicious circle, dispensing with the forced labour, the unnecessary waiting, the reifying mechanisms of exchange, and everything else that capitalism puts in the way of the free circulation of goods. They may be motivated by the precarious poverty the economy imposes on those for whom it can find no profitable use; or they may not be. It hardly matters. The commodification of life degrades the existence of everyone and is the enemy of the poor and the affluent alike. Those who act accordingly behave wisely.

As well as this unblocking of a niggardly abundance, the rioters have extended their violence to the police, buildings and cars. They have every reason to do so. The police are quite simply the enemies of the people, the fist of the state that suppresses us and the protectors of the economy that squanders us. The murders in which they indulge from time to time are only uncommonly stark illustrations of the position they always occupy in relation to the people and the role they always perform. These killings may employ more violence and terror than is to be found in the police's seemingly more benign activities, but it is the same hierarchical power that is wielded from above, and the same subordination of society to independent political and economic forces that is pursued. The rioters treat the guardians of alienated society with the contempt they deserve.

The physical terrain of the city is no more deserving of respect. No matter how handsome or sophisticated that may try to be, our streets are distant, ugly and unreal, colonized from top to bottom by power, commerce and the lies that serve them. Every institution, every public space, and every business exists outside and against ordinary people. Everything is occupied and everything is alien to us. The wide-ranging attacks of the rioters display a practical grasp of the truth that

alienation is everywhere. There is no reason to discriminate between different types of business, and no reason to exclude small businesses owned by local residents. They all reduce human relations to the exchange of equivalents. They all form part of the dismaying landscape of dispossession.

As for the motor car, that illusory symbol of consumable happiness whose sovereign right to crawl from nowhere to nowhere lays waste to cities and kills over a million people a year globally, the rioters can hardly be blamed for treating it with combustible contempt. As the gap between the image and reality of driving gapes ever wider, our cars become so many monuments to false liberation, the vehicular equivalents of those statues of Lenin that once mocked the oppression of Eastern Europeans. When the smooth course of the alienation of which cars are a part breaks down, they themselves are not always spared. The pleasure that can no longer be found in their use is sometimes sought in their destruction. You would have to have a heart of stone not to laugh.

And yet, the rioters do not go far enough in their rejection of this society. They may have briefly broken with the existing society by refusing to acquire goods through alienated work and exchange, but by returning afterwards to an untransformed private life, and using the objects they have looted (or the proceeds of their sale) in exactly the same way, and with more or less the same illusions of happiness, as any hypnotized consumer who pays at the checkout, they only brick up the holes they punched. This is what happened to the rioters of the 1980s. They were prematurely satisfied with an inadequate and incomplete rebellion. They returned to the fold, and the society they had only slightly damaged quickly rebuilt itself and swept them aside. Some are now dead, others are growing old; all of them are defeated. Is this what the rioters of 2011 wish for themselves? Do they want nothing more than to pursue through theft the same unattainable consumer dreams that everyone else futilely tries to buy? If not, they must open up a practical debate as to what must be done next. Simply repeating the riots would serve no useful purpose. During the 1980s and early 1990s there were dozens of riots. They did not prevent the dominant society from grinding on to where it is today. We must get closer to the heart of the beast: to a more effective and systematic contestation of the social processes and the social relations through which this society of alienation continually reproduces itself.

The thuggishness displayed by some of the rioters, with its dismal repertoire of muggings, assaults and intimidations directed at ordinary people, is another lump of the existing society weighing the rioters down. The gangsta is one of *this* society's *false* images of rebellion, an external role model that turns rebellion into emulation, and transforms dissatisfaction with mainstream society into contentment with its criminal flipside. The individual who takes up this role may go beyond the law, but in his own way he works, consumes, conforms, treats others as objects, and respects hierarchy and glamour. He or she therefore never

leaves this society's basic modes of living. If the rioters are to take their rebellion further, they must confront this *parody* of revolt in themselves and others.

In Liverpool 8 in 1981 rioters evacuated a geriatric hospital that was inadvertently threatened by the fires they had started, before returning to their battles with the police. This spirit was not always evident in the August riots. Its absence only hinders us. We should be going beyond previous rebellions, not falling below them. We need to be clearer about who are real enemies are, and choose our targets and tactics so as to avoid unnecessary suffering to those on our side of the social divide between the owners of society and those forced to serve them. Our enemies do not include the ordinary people who live in and around the streets in which we riot. Indeed, there can be no escape from our oppression until the vast majority of ordinary people take up the practical project of suppressing the political and economic powers that rule over us *all*. We must win them over to the side of revolt. We must make our rebellions into open and seductive *liberations* that *desirably* suspend as much of the old life as possible. We must also speak up for ourselves and our unrest in ways that cut through the deceptive propaganda with which the state and its apologists seek to contain any challenge to their authority. Self-admiring posturing in rap recordings and YouTube videos will not do. We need clear-sighted and open-hearted analysis such as can encourage other discontented individuals to overcome their resignation; not clichéd tales of hooded horror that will only end up being consumed in passivity by the many horrified or delighted spectators of this society's decomposition.

From these points of view, the gunfire in Birmingham seems singularly ill-judged. It reaches the mass of people only through the mystifying mediations of the press and the state; its puts passers-by at risk; and it threatens to reduce the unrest, in appearance and reality, to a remote and lethal conflict between specialists in armed violence.

And yet, it is a melancholy fact that many ordinary people are far from recognizing that revolt is necessary and desirable. Whatever ugly and stupid acts may have been committed on the side of the rioters, they are dwarfed by the repellent sight of at least a few "law-abiding citizens" being led by politicians they do not trust and media they do believe into proclaiming their submission to a society that is not theirs. Our epoch does not lack for ecstatic hymns to conformity, but these orchestrated choruses of pride of place, contentment with the given, and collaboration with the authorities, these solemn vows to go on limiting one's thoughts and actions to the impoverished and alienated mediocrity that this society imposes, are perhaps the most nauseating spectacles of prostration we have seen for a generation.

It is easy to understand how individuals who have been isolated and reduced to dependence on the economy and the state might be easily frightened by the violence of riots. But they have succumbed to mystification. Disquieted by the

latest in a long line of bogeymen that have been dangled before them, they cling to a state that endlessly finds new terrors to justify its protection and an economy whose blind careering ceaselessly fills their lives with shocks and uncertainties. Upset by death and destruction, they throw themselves into the arms of a society that not only kills millions each year through work, wars and preventable diseases, but continues rapidly to destroy the basic environmental conditions on which human life depends. Distressed by 100 homeless families and a few people deprived of their means of support, they bind themselves more firmly to a system that evicts 4,000 families from their homes each year for failing to meet the mortgages that have been hung around their necks and makes many more “redundant.”

Some have been moved to call for the defence and celebration of communities and cities. They confuse image for reality. There are no communities and nothing that deserves to be called a city. There are only isolated individuals smeared and stacked in boxes alongside desolate roads: indifferent atoms and molecules ricocheting off each other as they unheedingly hurry between the handful of places that define their circumscribed lives of work and consumption; strangers of varying politeness whose sole connection is the thin, dead relationship of buyer and seller. They decide nothing together. To think of them as a living entity that conducts its own affairs for its own ends is painfully absurd.

What seems especially to outrage some spectators is the lack of respect for property. In exchange for handing over their entire existence and the whole world to an autonomous economy, they are granted so very little: just a few feet of land, an undistinguished box in which to hide, another undistinguished box in which to take the journeys that the economy and its organization of space require us to take, and a small heap of possessions that never quite bring the happiness they promise. Yet the state invests all property with a sacred aura; and we grasp the little we own with all the ferocity of shipwrecked mariners clinging to a leaky life raft. The thought that we may lose it all, in a stroke, is an unnerving one. However, what should alarm us about our precarious and desultory wealth is not the remote possibility that it may be destroyed by rioters, but the sheer fact that it is all that we have and all that we shall ever have in this society. No matter how well we are paid, because we have abandoned the making of history, the creation of the social conditions that shape our lives, to powers that entirely escape us, we shall never be anything more than affluent paupers sheltering from the storms those powers produce.

The law-abiding citizens would like to think that their placidity is a mark of civility and civilization. They pretend to a dignity they do not possess. What they proudly display is mere submission. To sustain the economy's imperial domination over individual and social life, this society must produce tractable and pacified individuals who will serve in its workplaces, desire its products, protest in ways that do not threaten it, and mistake this passivity for a free and rewarding life. Every

organ of mystification that it possesses, from education to culture and media to politics, is directed to this end. The law-abiding citizen is the result.

And yet, not even the law-abiding citizens are as content with life as they would like to believe they are. They cannot quite suppress the troubling sense that their work, their leisure and their family life are disappointing and even dismaying; that their lives are just passing them by and they have never really lived or found out who they really are; that everywhere is the same and everything is a little boring; and that nothing they own satisfies them. Nor can they smile away the feeling that voting makes no difference and politics is pointless; that, indeed, the world is hurtling out of control and sinking ever more deeply into madness. All this is not “just how it is.” It is also not something that might be put right by a programme of social reforms, a few new toys, another holiday, a little less work, or a little more therapy. On the contrary, these subjective symptoms of the objective social alienation that is the very essence of this society are urgent and conclusive reasons to transform our rotten world: to take up the practical project of a social revolution that this time is conducted by and for ourselves and abolishes every power that exist independently of individuals. Nothing else will do. Nothing else is worth our while.

For all the complacent superiority with which the law-abiding citizens sneer at the rioters, they fall a long way below them in the one and only quality that is important in this suicidal society, namely *rebelliousness*. They should draw a little courage and inspiration from them. Of course, the rebellion of the rioters is tainted and inadequate in many ways, not the least of which is that it has, as yet, no notion of depriving the state and the economy of the means of production, communication and education through which those uncontrollable powers create the world in their own image. *But the remedy for bad rebellion is better rebellion: a more comprehensive critique of all aspects of alienated social life. A disgrace to ‘your’ country is something to be.*

Written by Ricardo Reis in August 2011