

## The August Riots 2011

### Comment by Ted Cante

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Views about the riots in London and other cities seem to divide between those who see the cause as one of 'basic criminality' and those that are searching for a deeper meaning in which people have been motivated by some form of political or economic alienation. And rather predictably, this divides between those on the Left and those on the Right. I think this is far too simplistic.

In fact, it is dangerous, in my view, to discuss the riots as though we are talking about one incident, or set of incidents. There was not one riot, not a single homogeneous group of people who participated, nor a single set of motivations. There were many different riots, in very different places, involving many different people, who took part for many different reasons. There may be some common threads, but we have to be careful not to overstate them.

It is also difficult to make a connection between these riots and those of the past. The riots in the 1980s revolved around the Black community who faced severe disadvantage, discrimination and aggressive policing over many years. The riots ten years ago in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham had also been simmering for some time with little understanding between Asian and White communities who both felt that the other were getting a better deal. It took very little for the Far Right to stoke up the resentment and mistrust. Both these previous riots had a racial element and both could be linked to disadvantage. These latest riots inevitably have these factors in the mix, though it is far less easy to regard them as causal.

The clearest link to 'race' was the shooting of Mr. Duggan, a black man, in Tottenham. The police appeared to bungle the whole event, failed to provide proper liaison with Mr Duggan's family, nor explain their actions and gave contradictory accounts. But it was the context of poor relations between the police and the black community over a long period of time that made this toxic. Policing has improved a great deal and is generally good compared to that found by Lord Scarman in his review of the Brixton riots. But the 'stop and search' of young black men continues to have a corrosive effect and the Duggan shooting simply gave expression to the angst and anger of the black community. This problem is not confined to London and questions have to be asked in other areas, for example police stations were attacked in Nottingham. The relationship between the police and the black community has to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

But this does not mean that what followed is necessarily related to the first incident, nor that, even within the Tottenham area, other rioters shared the same motivations

There was no doubt that a large measure of the riotous activity was driven by opportunistic theft with many young people, sometimes supported by elders and even their parents, grabbing what they could. Some may have also been driven by the sheer thrill of arson and vandalism and taunting of the police. People in crowds do things that they would never consider doing as individuals and it is all too easy to get caught up in the flow. The argument that 'this is all about criminality' is however difficult to sustain on our current level of knowledge. In support of the criminality thesis, a great many statistics have been published to suggest that the majority of rioters had 'form'. However, these relate to the percentage of those arrested and charged, not the number actually taking part. Those arrested are far more likely to have been known to the police in the first instance and possibly fail to account for a large section of the population that did take part but were unknown to the police.

So, perhaps the more interesting question is about why so many people were willing to grasp the instant gratification of criminal opportunities, had so little regard for their communities, fellow residents and businesses, and were prepared to battle with the police and willing to risk a criminal record. Has greed and irresponsibility become endemic in wider society – the bankers bonuses, the MPs fiddling their expenses, the burgeoning debts, the press hacking scandal – so that this is now an 'our turn' mentality which pervades ordinary communities? Is this a wider 'culture of criminality' which almost seems ignored by our political leaders, whereas rioters are immediately condemned for their actions and a whole panoply of measures, suddenly rolled out in tide or righteous indignation. We should of course condemn the criminality and mindless destruction of our local communities, but we have to be seen to be consistent and fair and tackle these other criminal and grossly irresponsible acts with as much or even more vigour.

Our political leaders also seemed to feel that people had 'lost their moral compass' and no longer 'knew the difference between right and wrong'. This may be true but such maxims have to be fairly applied. David Cameron's mantra that 'we are all in this together' is exactly right, but it will not be believed unless it is really seen to be true. Looting a shop is clearly a criminal act, whereas an executive awarding himself a several thousand per cent pay rise is merely 'irresponsible'. But the point is that they are both seen to be morally wrong and fail to embody the British value of 'fair play'.

The link between the riots and poverty and deprivation also seems somewhat tenuous. True, many of the areas involved were poor – Tottenham, Handsworth, Toxteth, St Paul's, Brixton – all have form in this respect. But many poorer areas were not affected and city centres and areas like Gloucester were also hit. Is it really an argument anyway to say that poorer people are more likely to steal? We simply do not know the number of people involved who were from poor areas, as we only have details of those arrested (see above point). We could just as easily suggest that, as many offenders were black and that, as many of the areas had a significant ethnic minority population, this was the 'cause'. In fact, that is exactly the line taken by the BNP who have grasped the opportunity to link the upheavals to 'race'. Black people feature heavily in the areas which are dominated by minorities and White people are most likely to be charged in the White communities. This tells us very little.

If this was a protest against poverty, we might have expected to see some form of political justification. But this seems to be post hoc if advanced at all. There is no evidence of political activity, no protests movements, no political demands – not even any slogans. It is mostly the commentators, rather than those involved, that are trying to find some link to government policies. Indeed, some elements of the riots were definitely regressive, with Inside Housing on the 19th August reporting one of the most shameful aspects – rough sleepers in Manchester, Birmingham, London and Liverpool were beaten and robbed. In other reports, it was clear that the lives of many ordinary families were put at risk by their fellow citizens when they were burnt out of their flats as buildings were set alight and it has been suggested that as many as 600 ordinary people were mugged during the riots. Hardly class warfare.

However, there is a sense in which this may be the start of a 'new age of protest'. We have seen the 'indignado' movement rapidly expand across Spain and in many other countries. The 'Arab Spring' somehow gives licence to communities to take to the street to demand a voice and progressive change. Public expenditure protests and strikes are gearing up and, regrettably, the Far Right in the form of the EDL are peddling militancy and creating tensions in many cities. Street level protest can feed of itself and become the new normal. This is a particular vulnerability where

trust in our political systems has all but collapsed. Support for political parties, turnout in elections and belief that our politicians can deliver real change, is at an all time low across Europe.

The irony is that society does need some element of challenge and conflict. Whilst cohesion must be our aim, conflict can bring about the change that all systems need to renew themselves - and to reflect the idea that we really are 'all in this together'. The real challenge is how we can re-build trust and channel the conflict and protest into democratic processes, rather than feeling that we have to take to the streets.

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